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SANDRA BURTON AND ADRIAN BLAJ

## Partners in Care: Staywell Support Group for patients. In the beginning was an idea

Motto: With perseverance a blade of glass splits rocks  
(Chinese proverb).

Over 3 years ago a former in-patient of mine walked quietly into my clinic and asked my opinion in respect of her desire to put something back into the system which helped her to recover. I instantly thought that this was a brilliant idea; a support group run by the patients for the patients! People around me remained sceptical about this project and simply thought the project was doomed to failure from the start as there was no known long-term successful precedent. Then I thought of the idea behind the enormously successful Alcoholics Anonymous self-help organisation founded in the USA by two alcoholic men, a surgeon and stockbroker. The result was impressive – I only wish that this project would find deep resonance in a few dedicated hearts and spread nationally. For those who want to read further about this against-all-the-odds journey, I stop myself and let Sandra tell the story about the origin of the Staywell Support Group.

In April 2001 I was admitted to the mental health unit at Chase Farm Hospital in North London suffering from severe anxiety and panic disorder; it was quite a frightening experience to find myself in those surroundings. The mental health unit sounded to me like I was mad or something; now I know it is different and realise that many people have mental health problems and need help sometime in their lives, and the environment of a hospital is needed to help people on their way to recovery.

Before I was admitted I suffered for a couple of years not being able to go out on my own and even when I was with my husband I quite often would run out of shops because of my panic. I did not socialise much for fear of people seeing me in an anxiety state. I suppose I was ashamed of how I felt, then again, now I know different and will tell people of my past and be proud of what I have achieved.

Out of a really bad experience came something positive and really interesting for me. While I was on the ward I realised how the patients looked out for one another; there was a common bond between them even though some had more severe conditions than others. They were all united in their determination to help one another. I was only on the ward for 3 weeks and when I returned home started the long process of getting well; I think it started to happen slowly when I finally accepted what was wrong with me and I gradually lost the fear, although I personally think that anxiety never leaves you permanently – it is how you deal with and handle it that is the key to success.

After I had been home for about 3 months, I got a phone call from a lady whom I had met on the ward; she had been readmitted and she asked me if I would visit her. I felt quite frightened of the prospect of going anywhere near the hospital again. However, this lady had been particularly kind to me while I was on the ward and I faced my fear and went to visit her. It was one of the best moves I have ever made. I continued to visit her two or three times a week for the 6 months that she was in the hospital. I began to get to know all the different

patients and thoroughly enjoyed talking to them all and seeing their progress. This gave me the idea that I would like to help people and maybe run a support group for them.

I had found something that I was good at, I communicated well with the patients and I think they in turn liked me because they knew that I had been in a similar situation and was beginning to enjoy my life again. I was one of the lucky ones. I have a loving and supportive husband, son and daughter-in-law; some people go home and have no support. I wanted to help, and what better place than the place that had helped me!

While seeing Dr Blaj in the out-patients clinic, I mentioned my idea to him and he was quite enthusiastic and contacted Mr Oliver Treacy (Director of Mental Health) about the idea. After a few letters were exchanged, Mr Treacy found a place I could use as a meeting room one day per week. Now all I needed was to build up the group and get people to attend. I thought about names and Staywell came into my mind. I thought this quite appropriate as that was the purpose of the group to help people manage their everyday lives a little easier and realise that they are not alone in how they feel.

I know at the beginning there were a few sceptics about an ex-patient doing this, as they thought it wouldn't last; now I have been running this group for over 3 years. It was not easy at the beginning; it was a lot of hard work persuading people to attend; people do not like change, especially when they are unwell. However, all the hard work has paid off; I have successfully completed and passed my CPCAB (Counselling and Psychotherapy Central Awarding Body) counselling skills exam and I am halfway through a counselling studies course. All of this is like a miracle to me and I am doing something that I enjoy so much; seeing people start the group they are often just an observer but within a few weeks they are contributing and really enjoying the experience.

There are now about 25 members on the register and between 14 and 18 attend each week. I produce a monthly newsletter and I am always there to listen to the problems of others. Staywell has become like a club and I know that if I had the funds I would certainly do more than I am doing now. I would love to make Staywell available to more people.

Also when patients are discharged from the day hospital they are still coming back to Staywell as it gives them a link with the hospital which is very beneficial for them; the group is now an important part of the day hospital programme. I have now a very good deputy and helper who will stand in for me when needed and I know that the group has helped her immensely as it has done for so many others. I will continue to do my best and make Staywell the success it has become.

I have also recently been able to use the group as others have and found out first hand how beneficial it is; a few months ago I had a rather nasty bout of *Salmonella* infection and was hospitalised. I was quite ill and this left me feeling rather low to say the least. The next thing I knew I had suffered a re-occurrence of my panic disorder; the group members were all very supportive towards me and it made me realise that they have all picked up the skills of listening and helping others.

I am now on the road to recovery and I am so proud of what I have achieved with Staywell and even prouder of its dedicated members. Certificates of achievement are given when a member is able to fulfil something that they

usually find difficult, and this gives them a boost and also makes them realise how everyone is behind them in their fight to get well.

Well that's what Staywell is all about and how it got started; I would like to thank Dr Blaj for having faith in me and Mr Oliver Treacy and the Barnet, Enfield and Haringey Mental Health NHS Trust for their continued support.

Since writing her account, Mrs Burton has expanded the Staywell Group to two full sessions weekly, is busy organising much loved social outings and fundraising events with the group members and has gained certificates for

Counselling Skills and Counselling Studies (Counselling and Psychology Awarding Body).

### Declaration of interest

None.

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