

Well Ways, a peer-led group education program for families of people with a mental illness, reduces negative caregiving consequences

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Introduction

The Well Ways Program

Well Ways is an Australia-wide peer-led group-based education and support program provided by the Mental Illness Fellowship for families and friends of people with a mental illness. The program comprises 8, three-hour, weekly sessions of education and discussion, followed by 4 workshops over the following 10 months.

Research objectives

This study sought to explore:

- The effectiveness of Well Ways in reducing negative caregiving consequences in families and friends of people with a mental illness
- Why Well Ways may be more effective for some carers than for others
- Carers' perceptions of how the program helped them

Background

Families of people with a mental illness report various negative consequences of providing care and support for their ill relative, such as strained relationships between family member and their ill relative, excessive worrying, and distress. Previous research has demonstrated that peer-led education programs for carers improve participants' psychological well-being and views of their relationships with their relatives with a mental illness. However, the mechanisms by which such programs effect change has not yet been established.

Hypotheses

Participants' tension, worrying and distress will be significantly lower following completion of Well Ways.

Well Ways will be more effective for participants who have more in common with other group members (mothers to a person with a mental illness, females, and relatives of people with a psychotic disorder) and for participants who are newer to the caring role.

Well Ways will reduce negative caregiving consequences via reducing stigma, via therapeutic group processes (universality, installation of hope, group cohesion and being understood), and via improving self-efficacy and empowerment, communication skills and empathy.

Method

Study 1

The Involvement Evaluation Questionnaire (IEQ) was completed by 459 participants (77% females, mean age = 55 years) from multiple sites around Australia before and after completing the Well Ways program. The IEQ measured Worrying, Tension, Supervision, Urging, and distress (General Health Questionnaire-12 (GHQ-12)).

Study 2

A follow-up survey was later completed by 156 participants from the original sample (78% females, mean age = 56). The survey measured participants' perceptions of what had been helpful about Well Ways and skills they had acquired. Scales measured helpfulness of therapeutic factors and program content; changes in perceived stigma; and gains in communication skills, empathy, self-efficacy and empowerment.

Results

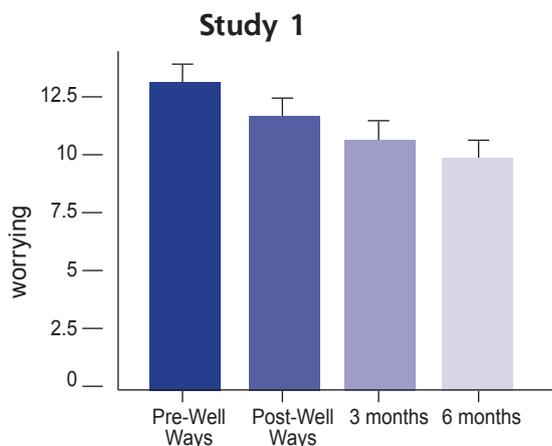


Figure 1. Mean Worrying scores across time. Error bars = 95% CI.

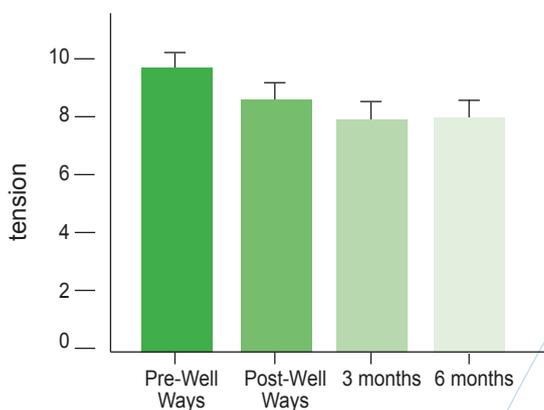


Figure 2. Mean Tension scores across time. Error bars = 95% CI.

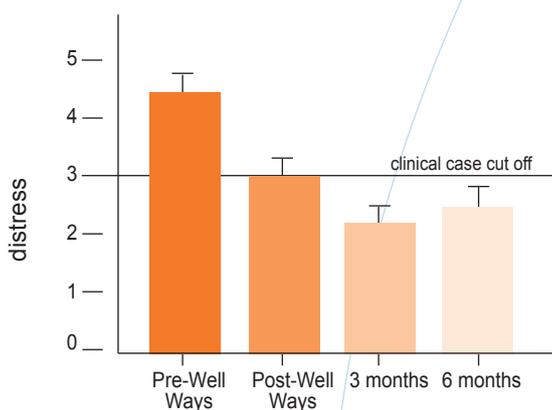


Figure 3. Mean Distress (GHQ-12) scores across time. Error bars = 95% CI.

Tension, Worrying and Distress scores were all significantly lower following completion of Well Ways, and these improvements were all maintained over time.

Well Ways was not more effective for participants who had more in common with other group members, except that females showed significantly greater improvements in Tension than did males.

Study 2

- 75.9% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that Well Ways had increased their sense of self-efficacy and empowerment.
- 87.2% of participants responded that they agreed or strongly agreed that the information provided in the program had helped them.
- 75.18% of participants responded that they agreed or strongly agreed that Well Ways had helped them to improve their communication skills with their relative or friend with a mental illness.
- 87.4% of participants responded that they agreed or strongly agreed that Well Ways had helped their ability to empathise with their relative or friend with a mental illness.

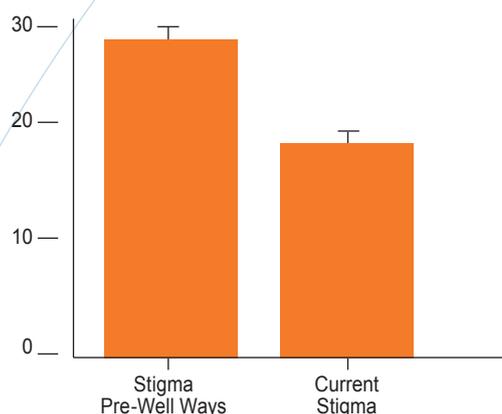


Figure 4. Mean scores on Stigma Pre-Well Ways and Current Stigma scales. Error bars = 95% CI.

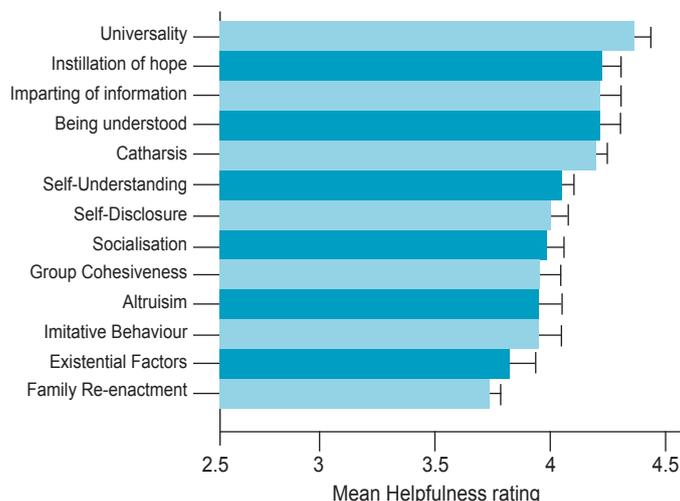


Figure 5. Mean helpfulness of group therapeutic factors. Error bars = 95% CI.

Information about diagnoses of participants' relatives or friends was collected as part of Study 2. Trends were observed toward relatives of people with a psychotic disorder gaining greater reductions in Distress, Worrying and Tension than relatives of people with other types of disorders. The smaller sample size in Study 2 meant insufficient power to test for significant interactions for the two groups. An example of this trend can be seen in Figure 6.

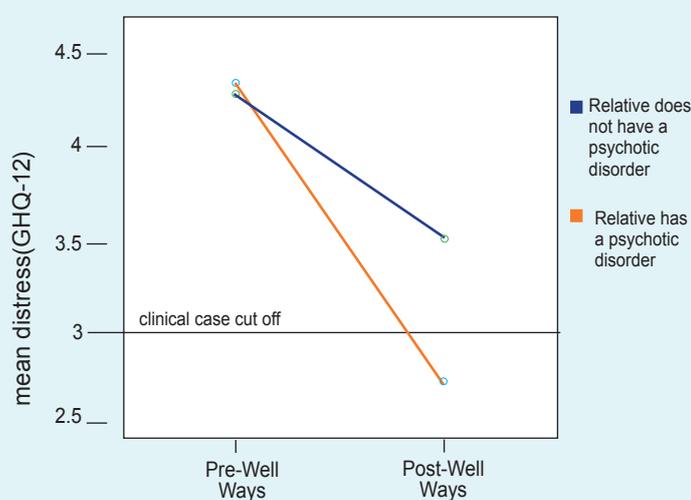


Figure 6. Mean Distress scores before and after Well Ways for relatives of people with psychotic disorders and relatives of people with other types of disorders. Error bars = 95% CI.

Key Findings

Well Ways led to significant reductions in participants' Tension, Worrying and Distress. These gains were maintained over time.

Females gained significantly greater reductions in Tension than did males.

Trends were observed for relatives of people with a psychotic disorder gaining greater benefits from Well Ways than did relatives of people with other disorders.

A large decrease was observed from retrospective ratings of Stigma prior to Well Ways to current levels.

Gaining a sense of Universality (sense that one is not alone, that "we're all in the same boat") was perceived as the most helpful group therapeutic factor.

Improved communication skills, increased self-efficacy and empowerment, the information provided within sessions, and increased ability to empathise with the person with a mental illness were all rated as highly helpful aspects of the program.

Conclusions & Recommendations for Future Research

Findings of significant reductions in negative caregiving consequences following participation in Well Ways lend support to the effectiveness of this brief and popular program. It is important to note that these gains were all maintained at 6 month follow-up.

Given the trends observed toward relatives/friends of people with a psychotic disorder gaining greater improvements, future studies could record diagnoses of participants' relatives in order to examine whether separate programs for separate subgroups would lead to greater improvements in outcomes.

Future research could incorporate measures of therapeutic factors, stigma and other potential mechanisms of change as outcome measures. This would allow formal testing of a model of mechanisms by which such programs effect improved outcomes.

References

1. Pickett-Schenk, S.A., Cook, J.A., Steigman, P., Lippincott, R., Bennett, C., & Grey, D.D. (2006). Psychological well-being and relationship outcomes in a randomized study of family-led education. *Arch. Gen. Psychiatry*, 63, 1043-1050.

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Well Ways Programs

These Well Ways family education programs are designed for families of people with mental illness to assist with the complexities of the caring role. Each program utilises a powerful combination of up-to-date, research based information in relation to mental illness and the caring role. This is layered with a broad, sensitive understanding of the many issues faced by a family when confronted by mental illness.



Well Ways Duo

This program provides an informed and sensitive perspective of the issues facing families managing the impact of dual diagnosis (mental illness, drug and alcohol issues). Conducted in an environment of trust and support, families develop an understanding of mental illness and its interaction with drug and alcohol, building problem solving skills which assist the management of difficult behaviours. The challenges of caring for someone in this situation are thoroughly explored, with the aim of decreasing depression, tensions and anxiety experienced in the family.

Well Ways Building a Future

This comprehensive program thoroughly addresses the issues arising when confronted with a mental illness. Conducted in 12 modules, it provides information about mental illnesses with insights into symptoms and behaviours. Practical strategies to improve communication and problem solving solutions are learned. The dilemmas faced by families are thoroughly explored and networks for ongoing support and information are created.

Well Ways Snapshot

This 2 module program provides participants with an introduction to the modern understanding of the causes of mental illness and pathways to recovery. Presented by a family member and a person with a mental illness, this program provides participants with ways to challenge the stigmas and stereotypes surrounding mental illness giving families hope and practical information to begin the recovery path.

For more information about Well Ways education programs contact:

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