



Challenging ideas in mental health

Challenging stereotypes

My name is Ann Mitchell. I'm a Lecturer at The Open University in Nursing with a speciality in Mental Health. The premise of this course is to give the service users, as well as the health professionals, the opportunity to explore the diverse and competing perspectives within mental healthcare and I suppose what you want the students to do is to look at some of the ideas that are presented and for them to contest them, particularly when they see certain practices being conducted, maybe in their own practice areas, it's for them to debate and discuss those and to contest, to some extent, what has been said, so it gives them a broad overview as well of what mental health is. But it also gives them the theoretical underpinning to what they're doing in practice.

My own background, I've worked in mental health for many years, both as a practitioner working in community mental health, but also I then went into nurse education because I felt that people do sometimes, haven't got a very clear idea of what mental health meant, so as a result of that I started off work in mental health, educating nurses at post-registration level, but then I moved into the pre-registration programme. When I was quite young I actually did voluntary work in a hospital, in an adult hospital, but as a result of that I felt that you didn't get the time to speak to patients and so even though when I first came to England I did do adult nursing, I then specialised in mental health because it's about the interpersonal relationship that seemed very important to me, and also I suppose trying to find out what goes wrong, and why someone (s not able to cope when they have a number of problems, and so as a result of that what then can you do as a practitioner to help them?

There is a number, too, of stereotypical ideas that people have because as a result of a mental health problem you may think that that person is no longer of service to society, but what we don't recognise is that they have much to offer, and that many of them actually can live very useful lives, can even return to work in the community and be quite successful, but we don't tend to hear of those examples, we tend to see mental health, mental health problems in a very negative light. And I wanted to challenge some of those ideas and I felt one way you could do that is through education, because by educating people you're actually getting them to reflect on their own attitudes, their values, their philosophies about life, to think about if they are going to go into that branch of nursing, how are they going to deal with those individuals, how will they be able to provide a programme of care that helps them to empower the individual to take control of their own life? That in itself is a skill and so I suppose the premise that you start with, with mental health nursing, is actually to make, is for the nurse to actually develop self awareness, you have to be aware of your own abilities, your own views, your own ideas first, before you can then go on to help someone else, so I suppose those are some of the challenges, starting with you as a person, and then you can just begin to challenge the wider society and help that person that you're dealing with, as I said, to take control of their own lives.