

Changing staff practices, rather than restraining adults with complex needs, can hold answers to challenging behaviour

Aggression is easily misunderstood: making environments more predictable, honouring routines and activities can transform behaviour. Our research examines how greater staff expertise pays dividends for all.

A young man – let's call him 'John' – has severe learning difficulties and complex needs. He behaves aggressively when helped to shower and shave, hitting out and kicking a member of staff, throwing soap across the bathroom.

What should staff do? Bring in extra support? Use restraints? It's a dilemma for staff. And this is a real case, dealt with by Peter McGill, Professor of Clinical Psychology of Learning Disability and co-director of the Tizard Centre, University of Kent.

'In this case,' he explains, 'the individual was getting too much help and the support was not actually very helpful. John was being told what to do a lot but he did not understand language very well. So people were making a lot of noise that he didn't understand. That was very stressful, leading to challenging behaviour. So we removed one of the two staff from the room and cut down the speech. The help and guidance that John received was much more visual.'

'By doing something that simple', explains Professor McGill, 'the situation changed instantly and effectively. John was able to

have his shave and the carers could relax. They were surprised how quickly everything improved. Typically, as a carer, you have little training in dealing with challenging behaviour. You generally think that it's the fault of the person and has nothing to do with you. You think that the person is misbehaving to get at you. You may see it as naughtiness, as bad behaviour which should be punished.'

'I was gobsmacked to find, after staff training, that they were able to do so many everyday things, such as making their own sandwiches. I had never imagined them doing so much.'

Staff member for supported accommodation

Such results led Professor McGill's team to set up a ground-breaking randomised control trial, funded by SSCr, to test whether supporting staff with fresh approaches can reduce challenging behaviour among people with complex needs.

The research follows the uncovering of excessive restraint and punitive regimes at Winterbourne View, a hospital specialising in assessment, treatment and rehabilitation for people with learning disabilities. A Government report on Winterbourne View found more than 500 uses of restraints in a 15 month period. 11 criminal convictions followed the closure in 2011.

There can be many causes of challenging behaviour, explains Professor McGill. These include individual factors such as the nature of a person's disabilities. But there are many other factors external to the person, such as how they are treated, the way they are asked to do things and the environments in which they live. However, social care, he says, tends to approach challenging behaviour mainly as an individual problem. So a person is referred to a psychologist or psychiatrist who prescribes some treatment or medication or a way to manage the persons' behaviour.

Professor McGill adds: 'We are looking at what we can do about those factors outside the individual, often reflecting how social care staff interact – how they respond and organise the environment. We want to see if we can treat challenging behaviour as being more of a system problem and less of an individual problem. The study could indicate some important ways to improve the quality of social care.'

Professor McGill describes a person living in a unit who was breaking into other areas, stealing money to buy cigarettes. 'There were a number of options. We could have dealt with it as his problem, and called him a kleptomaniac. But his behaviour was understandable. He did not have much money and it was difficult for

him to get cigarettes. So we gave him a job, as a security guard.

'His job was to make sure that nobody broke into the places he had broken into. He got paid for it. So he got to do what he had been doing – looking for open windows and getting money for cigarettes. Many of his behaviours were the same, but they were no longer challenging.'

The team focusses on two key interventions. First, coaching the staff in fresh approaches to particular individuals and ways to organise the environment better for them. Second, agreeing aims and standards with staff. 'Many social care services often don't really have a clear picture of what they are trying to do,' explains Professor McGill. 'In a sense, they are surviving from day to day. So, we might suggest the service aims to improve how it communicates what is going to happen to people who live here – we know that challenging behaviour is more likely when unpredictable events happen.

'Better communication might require more visual representation of what is happening, what's for dinner, which staff are working. So we agree a direction of improvement for the service and then offer support for the service to move in that direction.'

The study's findings could help identify new training, following the Winterbourne View report. The Government is committed to reducing the numbers of people with complex needs in hospital placements. But many are there because services cannot deal with their challenging behaviour, so social care providers will need more skills. With the Government keen to reduce the use of restraint, it is open to innovation.

Project: [Preventing challenging behaviour of adults with complex needs in supported accommodation](#)

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