COVID-19 and People with Learning Disabilities – Challenging Behaviour and Mental Health

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Plan

- Briefly talk about some of the challenges faced by people with learning disabilities during the current pandemic.

- Focus upon some of the changes that we can make to help improve support for people with learning disabilities.
It is well recognised that people with intellectual disabilities are more likely to have health and mental health problems.
Prompt and proactive identification of physical and mental health concerns are sometimes thought to be a challenge with people with learning disabilities.

This may be because clinicians inadvertently attribute concerns as being part of learning disabilities, or find it harder to recognise symptoms.
Mental health

- People with learning disabilities are at greater risk of mental health problems.

- There is evidence that infection with SARS-CoV-1 (note that COVID-19 is SARS-CoV-2) was associated with chronic fatigue, post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety disorders, and depression (Lam et al. 2009).

- Surveys within China during the current pandemic indicated that there has been an increase in anxiety and depression in the general population (Wang et al. 2020).
Challenging behaviour and communication

- We know that people with learning disabilities may display challenging behaviour.
- Challenging behaviour is often the way that someone with learning disabilities communicates their needs.
- Challenging behaviour is associated with health and social risks.
Many people with learning disabilities may not be able to communicate their needs.

This includes explaining how they are feeling.

It also includes understanding what is happening and why it is happening during the pandemic.
Social distancing and shielding

• Social distancing, and in some cases, shielding has been recommended.

• This will result in a marked change in routine for people with learning disabilities.

• This may result in an increase in distress and challenging behaviour. There may be an increase in health and social risks.
Personal protective equipment (PPE)

• This will disrupt aspects of communication. It will change your speech, and hide part of your face.

• It will affect the nature and quality of communication.

• This may lead to an increase in anxiety.
Bereavement

• People with learning disabilities may lose friends, partners, family members, carers, and other people who are important in their lives.

• Families may also lose their loved ones who have a learning disability.

• They may not be able to say goodbye in a manner that helps promote grieving.

• There is a risk that grief will be pathologized.
Addressing the challenges: Hospital passports

- Make sure you have one, or you review and update existing ones.

- Mencap have a good example: [https://www.mencap.org.uk/advice-and-support/health/health-guides](https://www.mencap.org.uk/advice-and-support/health/health-guides)

- Make sure to include information about those who know the person well, their family and their advocates.

- All people with disabilities are entitled to reasonable adjustments to the provision of healthcare under the Equality Act (2010).
Explaining the changes that are happening to many people with learning disabilities will be difficult. Many with mild or moderate learning disabilities will be able to understand verbal communication well enough, but this may not be the case for those with more severe learning disabilities.

There are resources that can help, such as Books Beyond Words – Beating the Virus – which is free.

https://booksbeyondwords.co.uk/downloads-shop/beating-the-virus
Addressing the challenges: Understanding what is happening

- The Challenging Behaviour Foundation have produced some help and guidance for supporting children and adults with severe learning disabilities.
  

- And help with handwashing.
  
Addressing the challenges: Understanding what is happening

• The University of Glasgow have produced some Guided Self-Help materials about COVID-19, as well as low mood, sleeping, staying active, solving problems, anxiety and relaxing.

Addressing the challenges: Understanding what is happening

• The International Association for the Scientific Study of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities has a list of resources: https://www.iassidd.org/covid-19-resources/

Community learning disabilities teams have a role to play in helping people with learning disabilities, their families and carers.

Community learning disabilities teams can provide specialist advice and support.

The Challenging Behaviour Foundation have produced some helpful guidance for families and carers which is free here.

https://www.challengingbehaviour.org.uk/information/covid19information.html
Addressing the challenges: Mental health and challenging behaviour

• Positive Behavioural Support plans need to be reviewed and updated.

• This should include a review of the formulation, triggers, proactive and reactive strategies in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. You should include this in a COVID-19 care plan.

• Some interventions will need to be modified (e.g. activity scheduling, communication strategies).

• There may be changes to key staff, carers, or family members.
Addressing the challenges: PPE

- When wearing PPE, use your eyes and natural gesture to facilitate positive communication.
- Affix your picture to your protective clothing.
- Introduce yourself.
- Slow your speech appropriately as needed.
- Use clear sentences.
- Always seek advice and support from someone who knows the person well.
- Make use of communication aids, signing or symbols.
Exercise and access to the community is important to so many people with learning disabilities.

Addressing the challenges: Mental health and challenging behaviour
Addressing the challenges: Mental health and challenging behaviour

• Some individuals may require multiple support staff to be present when accessing the community, and some people with learning disabilities may need to do this more than once per day.

• This may attract the attention of others.

• Avoiding these activities is likely to be determinantal to the health and wellbeing of many people with intellectual disabilities, disrupting their quality of life.

• Community learning disabilities teams should work with families, and consider issuing letters to families and carers that can be shown as appropriate.
• There are concerns about some of the changes that have been made to the provisions of the Mental Health Act as a consequence of the Coronavirus Act (2020) (e.g. removal of the requirement of two medical practitioners to agree to detention under Section 2).

• People are concerned that some people with learning disabilities may be detained, especially as all the changes that are happening affect mental health.
Community learning disabilities teams need to work effectively with all during the pandemic to continue to provide excellent care and support to families.

They should work effectively to help guard against unnecessary admission to hospital continuing to work within the spirit of the Transforming Care Agenda in England (2017).

Addressing the challenges: Mental Health Act.
Summary

• These are challenging times for people with learning disabilities and their families.

• However, with appropriate intervention, it is hoped that the impact upon people with learning disabilities is minimised.

• Family members, carers, and those who know someone well are exceptionally well placed to work collaboratively with community learning disabilities teams to help address any issues.