

JAMI: the Jewish Association for Mental Illness

Professor Martin Aaron, Hon. President



Mental Health in the Jewish Community

As with most charities, Jami was created out of a desperate need in the Jewish community for a totally dedicated mental health service. The lack of provision was causing so much intolerable suffering, not only to the person suffering from the illness, but also to their family. Suicides were just as common in our community as across the rest of the UK. Something had to be done to alleviate the suffering. The blatant insufficiency of Department of Health support had to be redressed and some 27 years later still needs much greater attention.

The reason for Jami's dedicated mental health service was to provide members of our Community with the option of such a service within a culturally sensitive Jewish environment.

The Community has always responded to society's challenges from within a rich Jewish ecology, in which we celebrate a vibrant Jewish life. In our Jewish culture, we turn to our traditional social marketplace for inspiration and community support to meet the challenges of everyday life.

We have an awareness of the underlying unity that makes each individual Jewish person a part of each Jewish Community and our people as a whole. Within our Community, from both secular and religious standpoints, spirituality is the essential life force that underpins, motivates and vitalizes us, creating the warm relationship we have with one another.

Unfortunately, 27 years ago this community warmth did not always extend to the most vulnerable within the Community. We needed a community service that was to be inclusive; no one suffering from a mental disability who identified themselves as being Jewish, whether religious or not, should be denied advice and support. We were careful not to replicate any suitable mental health service already being provided elsewhere. In this respect, we were to provide an exclusive service not being provided by any other organisation.

Challenges along the way

From the outset, we soon found that the stigma and discrimination was just as prevalent in the Jewish Community as elsewhere, and this we set out to combat.

Meetings were held with parents and carers to discuss their needs and the difficulties they had come up against in seeking support for their family member. Articles were written in the Jewish press and the local newspapers in order to gain publicity for our fledgling organisation. Where prejudice existed, we confronted it, and those who denied equal support for those in need, in order to overcome such prejudice.

When we appealed to the community for funds for a purpose-built residential home for fifteen residents, we found the fundraising very difficult. However, with an initial bank loan and certain charitable individuals' support, we eventually reached our target. Yet, with

detailed plans of the proposed home submitted to the local authority, another obstacle confronted us at the authority's planning committee; a petition was produced from local residents vehemently objecting to our new home in their residential area. Needless to state we won our case, and the home was built.

What is Jami?

Jami is an association that was founded at an inaugural meeting of parent carers on the 24th August 1989, and thereafter registered as a charity. Today we have a Board of Trustees, a Clinical Governance Board, and a staff of some 60 personnel headed by our Chief Executive.

Early days...

During Jami's first two years, we were keen to establish how many members of our community actually suffered from a mental illness. Therefore, a survey was carried out across all NHS psychiatric units and hospitals in an attempt to establish, if at all possible, the number of patients who identified as Jewish. No names were required, and at that time, the hospitals were co-operative. From the information gathered from the NHS, and from the Community, we were better able to quantify the approximate need, and continued to develop our community based services.

Obtaining co-operation within the Community was not easy, so as Founder Chairman I planned a programme of talks at some 37 synagogues and their communities in London and South East England. This I personally carried out over the following two-year period. This proved very successful. It led to one synagogue providing their premises at no cost for Jami's first London day centre. We continued to solicit support.

Looking at the whole person - an holistic approach

Although not initially recognised as important by colleagues, as founder and Jami's first chairman, an holistic view of mental health service provision has always been my intention, and with spirituality an essential part of our caring and support services - looking at the whole person, understanding them, and their hopes and aspirations. Learning from our past experience and the past experience of colleagues has helped to build our quality services.

Inspirational people and inspiring services

Areas of encouragement - encouraging and inspiring Jami staff. It has been our policy from the outset that those engaged in providing our mental health services should have an empathetic approach to their work. This is an essential part of Jami's service. Service users are encouraged to play their part in our daily programmes, and do so.

Recovery values

After almost 25 years of development of its community based services, in 2013 Jami became responsible for the running of the Community's non-residential mental health provision, creating a single mental health service for the Jewish Community in London and South East England.

Working alongside statutory services, Jami is committed to supporting people to fulfil their potential, maximize their self-esteem and progress along their own unique pathway towards recovery. Our work is guided by Recovery values and principles:

Control: Helping people take back control and facilitating personal adaptation.

Opportunity: Helping people to access the roles, relationships and activities that are important to them.

Hope: Fostering hope and hope inspiring relationships.

Through this holistic lens, we support people to lead their lives as independently and meaningfully as possible. We support a spectrum of people from those experiencing a first episode of depression to people who have been living with mental illness for many years.

The Clinical Team

We offer a social model of support. Our clinical team is led by our Head of Service who comes from a Senior Occupational Therapy background in the NHS. She is supported by a clinical governance board. Our team features Occupational Therapists, Social Workers and Peer Support Workers. This team works alongside the Head Room Team, a group of mental health educators/facilitators and peer trainers leading a recovery and community education programme, to appeal to the diversity of London and the South East's Jewish communities.

Jami runs four locality services, which include day programmes in centres at Edgware, North Finchley, Gants Hill and Stamford Hill.

Internal and external services

- Successful Carers' service providing support to those involved in the care of someone with a mental illness or distress.
- Employment and Education service enabling people back into work both paid and voluntary and education.
- Jami Enterprise – our project based in a modern warehouse enabling people to have access to the world of work including our thriving online enterprises.

Head Room Education Programme

- Recovery education courses

- Information seminars
- Mind and Body Spa

Our aim is to raise our profile as Jewish community educators with the rest of the Jewish voluntary sector, and the wider community.

We market Head Room to the Jewish communities (both to those affiliated through their synagogue community, and those who are secular in their identity) as providing something for everyone. We are working to create an inclusive learning community where people with lived experience can gain more tools for their recovery through our recovery education courses on areas such as The Challenge of Change; Finding Your Voice and Having Your Say; Creative Routes Out of Depression and Anxiety.

We provide one-day information seminars covering a breadth of subjects linked to mental health, such as Borderline Personality Disorder and Depression, and allied areas such as Lost for Words: A Seminar for Carers and Living in the Jewish Community with Mental Illness

A new area for Jami is the Mind and Body Spa where we run courses for the community in wellbeing such as Introduction to Mindfulness or Stress, Bad Hair Days and Finding my Mojo.

Jewish Social Capital

We have great social capital in the Jewish community, which can help protect mental wellbeing. Like all communities we need to reflect upon how we can continue to build bridges for the more vulnerable and harder-to-reach parts of the community, to enable them to be able to tap into that social wealth. Jami works to reach out and facilitate access to that social wealth, both by our Head Room education programmes and through our outreach work to local communities.

Jami used the Jewish press and social media platforms to launch our Think Ahead campaign in 2015. These images appeared in the Jewish press. Our referrals doubled. Interestingly, many people living with Personality Disorders were for the first time aware of our service and asked for our support.

Part of our Head Room, education and awareness raising takes us into Jewish schools. We provide interactive workshops on mental health awareness, stress management and university transition, for secondary school children from Year 8 to the sixth Form.

We have grown from a small charity set up by concerned families into a professional and peer-led staff team. We support people living with mental illness and reach out across the Jewish communities to enable everyone to be in touch with their own mental health, increase understanding and challenge stigma.

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