

The Absence of Compassion in Acute Mental Health Services: Restoring Compassion, a Vital Foundation for Recovery, as the Cornerstone of Care

Abdul Rahman

Director of Mental Health Services at Relationships Australia

Michael Sheehan

Director of Mental Health Services at Relationships Australia

Abstract:

Despite the widespread belief that compassion is at the heart of mental health care and practitioner-consumer relationships, it is no longer a common feature of mental health care discourse. Compassion remains essential for fostering a person's hope, a critical component of recovery in mental health care. This compassion deficit has arisen from political, systemic and institutional factors that have led to the rationalisation of services, an overemphasis on evidence-based practice, and societal concerns and priorities around controlling risk and uncertainty. There is a greater intolerance for difference, power is notoriously imbalanced, leading to institutional oppression, service users are viewed as potentially dangerous and 'problematic' behaviour must be dealt with decisively. The increasing demand for mental health services, coupled with reduced staffing levels, resource shortages, and inadequate organisational support, has resulted in burnout and disillusionment among mental health professionals, adversely affecting their ability to act with compassion. Furthermore, rather than viewing mental distress as an understandable reaction to trauma and social problems, mental health difficulties are attributed to biogenetic factors that foster negative attitudes towards service users, hindering humane and compassionate responses and creating a prescription epidemic. This presentation will highlight how globalisation, capitalism and current political climates have led to a lack of compassionate care in acute mental health services. It will advocate for reintroducing, prioritising and supporting compassionate care and show how it can thrive in mental health contexts. Only through the lens of compassion can we genuinely understand someone grappling with despair, tormented by voices, or imprisoned by their fears, and assist them on their journey to recovery that is beyond just rhetoric.