FAQ: Guidance for engaging family, friends and carers in aftercare and other services

This resource was co-produced with people with lived and living experience. It is designed to support aftercare and other service staff to identify and meaningfully engage family, friends and carers during conversations with people accessing their services.

How could staff ask someone accessing support whether there is anyone in their life who supports them (a family, friend or carer)?

Service staff can ask open questions about who the person spends time with and who helps them make life easier.

Consider asking:

- Who do you spend your time with?
- Who are people around you who you trust?
- Do you have anyone who you feel supports, helps or assists you positively in your daily life?
- Is there anyone you would like to be involved in your care, such as supportive friends, family, carers, kin or paid support? Alternatively, is there anyone you would prefer not to involve?

When asking these questions, consider that some people may have no support around them. Others may have support but only trust a small number of people.

Many people do not identify as carers. What language could service staff use to acknowledge and validate the caring role?

Many people do not identify as carers. Using terms such as supporting, assisting or helping may help acknowledge and validate the caring role.

Consider asking:

- Do you spend time supporting, caring for or assisting a family member, friend or loved one with a mental health concern or someone experiencing distress?
- Do the person or children you care for have any additional support needs?

Service staff can also ask whether the person would like support in their caring role. If they are already connected with a service, ask whether it is meeting their needs and whether they would like information about other options.

What helps family, friends and carers feel recognised, included, valued and supported during conversations with service staff?

Family, friends and carers may feel recognised, included and supported when service staff work in partnership with them and the person receiving support. This includes asking for their insight and suggestions during conversations rather than being spoken at.

Family, friends and carers may also feel supported when:

- their own needs are acknowledged, including the need for carer support and training
- staff identify when family, friends and carers may need emotional support, respite or referral to specialist carer services
- communication is open, clear, direct and simple
- their cultural backgrounds and traditions are acknowledged and reflected in care
- they are involved in the care of their loved one from start to finish
- they are treated with respect and listened to
- their experiences are valued
- they are provided with information, resources and copies of care plans with consent from the person accessing support
- their knowledge of the person they care for is recognised in providing the most appropriate care for their loved one, particularly where they have a lifelong relationship, such as between a parent and child
- they are asked questions directly and given space to contribute, while respecting the voice and autonomy of the person receiving support
- they are acknowledged as an important part of their loved one's care team.

What words, phrases or communication approaches might make family, friends and carers feel uncomfortable or less likely to engage with service staff?

It is important to recognise that each person may have different perspectives and approaches to mental health, shaped by their social and cultural background and lived experience. The role and importance of family, friends and carers may also differ. For example, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have their own ways to approach social and emotional wellbeing, which should be acknowledged in care and treatment.

Family, friends and carers are less likely to engage with services when they experience:

- being told they cannot be involved in care and treatment planning
- lack of communication or responsibility being passed between services
- their advocacy efforts not being heard or acted on
- assumptions being made and their concerns dismissed.

Family, friends and carers may feel uncomfortable when they hear staff say phrases like:

- ‘’We know what's best.’’
- ‘’We can only do it one way.’’
- “That’s not our job.”
- ‘’If we can only contact you and not the person we need to support directly, then we can't help.’’

Family, friends and carers identified the following language as barriers to engagement:

- language that places blame or shame on the person receiving support or their family, friends and carers
- language that is stigmatising, discriminatory or exclusive
- the use of jargon.

Is there anything else service staff should consider when identifying or engaging family, friends and carers?

Family, friends and carers identified the following considerations:

- Ask open-ended questions to understand the person's needs and preferences.
- Respect the person's consent, privacy and confidentiality when involving family, friends and carers, including where the person accessing support does not consent to their involvement.
- Avoid asking the same questions multiple times, as this can come across as service staff not paying attention.
- If service staff do not understand what a family member, friend or carer is trying to communicate, consider whether another staff member, interpreter, peer worker or Aboriginal liaison worker may be better placed to assist.
- Ask family, friends and carers what would help them, rather than making assumptions about their needs.
- Recognise that family, friends and carers may have different accessibility, literacy and communication needs.
- Ask family, friends and carers how they prefer to receive information and communication, and provide information in accessible formats where possible.
- Recognise that family, friends and carers and the people they support may experience interpersonal conflict, have different goals or experiences of domestic, family and sexual violence, and have different safety needs.
- Recognise that every person's support network is different, including chosen family, young and older carers, culturally diverse support networks and informal supports.
- Recognise that caring roles and a person's capacity to provide care may change over time.
- Use a trauma-informed approach when communicating with family, friends and carers.
- Staff members should reflect on their own communication style, biases and assumptions when engaging with family, friends and carers and seek supervision when required.