



Anyone for a Conversation and a Crew Cut?: *Barbershop* Magazine

Men have a complicated relationship with mental health. Stereotypes dictate that men must be strong and silent when it comes to their emotions, that they are not supposed to reveal if they're sad or lonely. Stephen Lewis, an Ashram-employed Community Development Worker (CDW) and now editor of *Barbershop* magazine, is conscious of men's reluctance to seek help. More women than men are diagnosed with depression. Yet male suicide rates are higher, and in Birmingham Afro-Caribbean men are seven times more likely to be involuntarily sectioned than white men. BME men in particular are less likely to believe that mainstream mental health services can be of help to them – and indeed their mistrust is not baseless: they are less likely to be offered talking therapies and are often misdiagnosed. Racial stereotypes and cultural expectations around masculinity are forcing men to enter the system only at crisis point.

And so *Barbershop* magazine has been shaped with all this in mind. Originally based in Preston, it was launched at a community centre in Aston last year. As a CDW Stephen worked with the magazine since its launch in Birmingham and he is now the editor/Project Manager. It is distributed in, of course, barbershops. And, Stephen reveals that when they're getting a new haircut, men are no different from women when it comes to chatting about all manner of things! "If it's there in front of them, men are more inclined to seek help," he says. So the distribution of *Barbershop* – which also goes to community centres and youth groups – bypasses some of the anxiety men feel about seeking out mental health issues. But how does the content appeal to BME men? Stephen emphasises the focus on accessible and familiar language: it has an "urban feel", he explains. It avoids jargon at all costs and offers a realistic perspective in a language that "young guys speak." *Barbershop's* team strive to accommodate disabled people: things like dyslexia inform the variation in formats (there are comic strips as well as text-heavy articles), and feedback from the first issue made the team aware that harsh colours can be off-putting, especially for people with mental health problems.

There are articles offering basic information and myth-busting on conditions such as schizophrenia and depression. The writers constantly seek to combat the stigmas around mental health: "depression is nothing to be embarrassed or ashamed of", the article *Don't Let it Get You Down* affirms. And the magazine doesn't put the entire burden on BME men when it comes to changing their relationship with mental health services. *Barbershop* is not afraid to be impassioned and political, and the article *Time for Change* explored how Primary Care Trusts and CDWs can bridge the gap between

alienated BME men and medical institutions. There's a mix between the heavier pieces and light-hearted approaches. There are personal accounts of experiencing mental health problems, which openly acknowledge people's hostile reactions to mental illness – whilst ultimately emphasising the positive results men encountered when they sought help.

Stephen makes it clear that *Barbershop* doesn't want to talk down to its readership – rather it wants them to lead on the content. The article *State of Confusion*, about cannabis and its legal status, may seem shocking in its frankness: if you're not going to cut out cannabis completely, writes Tony Roberts, you can cut down: "avoid holding smoke in your lungs...Only buy what you need." Yes, it's pragmatic and realistic. But what good would it do to take a dogmatic Just-Say-No approach when this magazine ultimately needs to engage with communities with whom mental health services can't? It's crucial that the magazine is inclusive and appealing. This is also evident in the many articles about various aspects of BME culture. BME communities doesn't just mean Black and Asian people – it includes Polish, Irish and Chinese communities. There's a piece on St Patrick's Day, *40 Shades of Green*, which isn't explicitly about mental health –it's about giving the readers insight into each others' cultures, explains Stephen. Similarly, he wants to ensure that the regular recipe page promotes awareness of ethnic diversity as well as encouraging a good diet – which of course has a strong relationship with well-being.

The team behind *Barbershop* are currently looking at how they can make the magazine service-user led. As it is, participation by service users in a steering group already shapes the nature of the magazine. The group meets monthly and people from social enterprises, community groups, health professionals and service users themselves participate. Stephen explains it's crucial to get the target readership's perspective. Some felt the first edition's comic strip was too heavy: it depicted homelessness, food scavenging, drug dealing and guns. The next edition took a softer yet still very relevant approach as readers were introduced to Jordan, a video store employee. Jordan's struggle to live with his schizophrenia through medication and its side effects is compassionately depicted.

No doubt the content of *Barbershop* will continue to be shaped not just by BME men's reactions but by their active input into the content. Stephen tells me about a local contributor named James, who's based in Aston. His pieces are "so thought-provoking" says Stephen, who also highlights that the "main thing on the agenda" is getting the readership of *Barbershop* to take responsibility for its publication.

Although Stephen acknowledges there are challenges to his role – the need to be inclusive of people from different cultures and at different stages in their lives, for example – he strongly believes in the importance of what *Barbershop* does. And he enjoys his work – meeting the various different people and going beyond stereotypes. As he points out, young urban men are

often read a certain way by those who don't know them, but this prejudice can mean society loses track of what guys are going through. Barbershop gives BME men an opportunity to speak out and to recognise the portrayal of mental illness as something people like them experience – and deal with. Because otherwise, "if we don't reach out to them", Stephen points out, "they won't reach out to us."