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The impact of culture and teamwork in group homes

What you will learn:

- **Learn how teams in group homes can make residents feel safer and have better outcomes**

- **Learn why the attitude of the whole team can be more important than individual team members' attitudes**

- **Learn how effective teamwork can help reduce the use of restrictive practices**

- **Learn how safety and safeguarding human rights requires a coordinated team and a culture of awareness with all individuals – employees, residents and families – playing a role.**

Various non-technical skills affect safety in health care and other industries.[1,2] These interpersonal skills (around how someone interacts with others) include leadership, communication, the ability to work well in a team, and being constantly aware of what is going on around them (situational awareness).

This insight looks at teams and culture in group homes (shared accommodation). It summarises some relevant findings from research that can help Yooralla employees better work together to support group home residents.

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A team is a social network in which members influence each other by their attitudes, values, behaviours and agreed way of doing things.[3] Leadership and management structures within teams profoundly affect how well they work.[4–6]

Research on disability group homes mainly looks at how employees work together to support residents with intellectual disabilities who display **behaviour of concern**.[7–12]

Behaviours of concern

Behaviours that indicate a risk to the safety or wellbeing of the people who exhibit them or to others.[13]

Effective teams:

- are unified – there are no factions

- have secure relationships among members and with the team manager/leader

- have effective leadership and management structures where the team leader coaches, organises and supervises the team, while management supports the leader with employee recruitment, training and career development

- meet regularly to reflect on shared observations and insights that could improve the way they work

- communicate openly about feelings and expectations – they listen, negotiate and resolve conflicts together

- cope with occupational stress in a way that avoids becoming more controlling

- show empathy, trust and positive emotions and provide emotional support to lessen stress and improve mental health and wellbeing

- share common values and awareness about the kind of behaviours that define quality support for residents

- have a shared focus on residents' outcomes in everything they do

- are confident in the effectiveness of residents' individual behaviour support strategies

- share responsibilities

- work collaboratively to solve problems

- accept help from experts outside the team and from residents' families

- give and receive feedback; and

- evaluate how well they are performing.

When examining ways to support group home residents with intellectual disability who may display behaviours of concern, research on teamwork stems from a focus on protecting safety, while research into culture takes a human rights perspective. These two outlooks are reflected in the tension that group home employees must balance between protecting – at the same moment – security and welfare in their practice.[12]

Numerous intertwined factors cause behaviours of concern, and these factors are specific to an individual and their environment. The environment includes the physical environment, the people around them such as support workers and other residents, along with working practices and culture within the home.[14]

Individual support workers have different styles of working with residents who display behaviours of concern. However, evidence shows that the collective team attitude is what really influences how an individual acts in response to a resident's behaviour.

Collective team attitude is what really influences how an individual acts in response to a resident's behaviour

Culture influences whether residents engage in activities and the success of strategies to support wellbeing

When a resident displays a behaviour of concern, team members may pull together, viewing the behaviour as a threat to the team and individual members.[15] In response they may protect employees by controlling the behaviour of concern with restrictive practices or seclusion.

In contrast, teams with the right attitude look for the reason behind the behaviour. Such teams reflect on the behaviour to understand why it is happening and the resident's desired outcomes. They may respond by providing more personal space and setting boundaries or agreeing on goals rather than coercion – this way of reacting leads to a safer environment.

Culture within group homes means the way that things are done. Part of the culture in homes is how teams go about regulating behaviours of concern and improving the quality of residents' lives. A team with a positive culture works in line with the organisation's stated values, is friendly and sympathetic towards the residents, supports each resident to gain life experiences that they want, and follows person-centred working practices. Residents, families and team members with a mix of experience, training, seniority and gender balance can all have a positive influence on a group home's culture.

Researchers looked at the culture around effective team leadership and employee alignment with organisational values.[16,17] They found that culture influences whether residents engage in activities and the success of strategies to support wellbeing – altering residents' community participation.

Research shows that team members value residents and their relationships with them. This was a common cultural characteristic seen in better-performing group homes across multiple service providers in three Australian states.[18]

Implications for Practice

- **The core of an effective team is a shared focus on resident outcomes, effective practice leadership and good communication.**

- **When supported by a stable team of familiar employees, residents feel safer and appreciate the connection.**

- **Team attitude has a more significant impact on how support workers act than their individual attitudes. The best way to improve team behaviour is for the whole team to train and learn together.**

- **Efforts to improve team climate and culture within group homes may result in fewer behaviour of concern incidents and lessen their emotional impact.**

- **Practice leaders and management must recognise that the team is broader than the house team. Openness, understanding, navigating and connecting with the whole system of support is essential.**

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