

IN FOCUS

Public attention has focused on mental health like never before. From members of royalty talking about their experiences, to concern over social media and rises in young women self-harming and suicide among men.

Last month's tragic news that television presenter Caroline Flack had taken her own life triggered renewed debate and discussion.

Politicians on all sides of the political spectrum now acknowledge the importance of mental health, with pledges by the government to put its status on equal footing with physical health while boosting spending and staff numbers.

And yet amid all this, the role of social work in mental health is rarely mentioned. It's something Ella Joseph, co-chief executive of the social work in mental health training programme Think Ahead, is keen to change she tells *PSW*.

"Many of the factors that are key to helping people get well and stay well are social in nature," she says.

"The recent briefing by the Commission for Equality in Mental Health is an important reminder of how 'social determinants', including inequalities and discrimination in housing, income, and employment, affect people's chances of experiencing mental health problems and their ability to move towards recovery. So it makes sense that social interventions should be the focus of energy in community mental health services."

Promoting this is one of Think Ahead's priorities for the decade. The good news, says Ella, is that mental health professionals across all disciplines increasingly understand the role of social issues in supporting people.

"Across the NHS trusts and local authorities we work with, we have seen brilliant examples of services embracing social interventions, like working systemically with service users' families," says Ella.

Social workers are "leading the charge" on this, she says, and have a role to play helping other professionals to adopt social approaches in their work.

"Social work is an evidence-based profession and the more we can develop the evidence base to demonstrate the efficacy of these approaches, the more likely they are to become mainstream."

We must be heard in **MENTAL HEALTH**

The power of social solutions in mental health is still not fully recognised
Think Ahead's co-chief executive Ella Joseph tells *PSW*

Championing and raising public awareness of the role of mental health social work is another of Think Ahead's focuses for the decade.

"Our research into the public's understanding of mental health social work found that only four in ten people recognised social workers as important providers of mental health support," says Ella.

"Raising the profile of the profession and its unique impact is a prerequisite for creating more space for social workers in multidisciplinary teams and improving the diversity of the workforce."

The power of social interventions to change the lives of people with mental health issues is something Ella feels passionately about.

"Working closely with newly qualified social workers, I am regularly moved by stories of how social interventions have changed peoples' lives. Our ambition for social work this decade should be to strengthen and empower the profession. This is crucial for people experiencing severe and enduring mental health problems. To do this we need to continue to make the case for the unique, social role that social workers can play."

While "huge strides" have been made in reducing stigma surrounding common mental health problems, less progress has been made with more severe conditions such as schizophrenia or personality disorders, says Ella. It's something she also hopes will change over the next decade.

"The experiences of people with severe mental health problems are mentioned less frequently in the media and there's a marked difference in the nature of the coverage which is often sensationalist," says Ella.

More constructive reporting by the press is part of the answer but she adds: "The media alone isn't the solution – we all have a responsibility to be open-minded and willing to challenge prejudice. This means giving mental health social workers a voice: the profession is ideally placed to amplify service users' voices, to highlight inequalities, correct misinformation, and help promote inclusion."



Ella Joseph