

## **SWAN Mental Health and Wellbeing Webinar on the CHIME model of mental health recovery.**

Below is a short summary of our SWAN discussion led by Jenn Layton Annable, whose area of specialism is mental health recovery for autistic women. There were 22 attendees. Overall, we felt that CHIME does represent a framework for us in the autistic community to support a discussion around our mental health needs going forwards. As a group we were very interested in CHIME and how it might relate to our own experiences and mental health requirements.

We were clear as a group that it should be recognised many autistic people would not be 'returning' to a state of good mental health post the current COVID-19 context as they weren't there in the first place. There are ways in which the lock-down has caused increased mental-health difficulties for many of us and some ways in which it has actually improved our overall levels of stress or mental health burden.

'Recovery' is going to mean different things to different people. For many autistic people, mental health recovery, outwith the current crisis, entails a process of recovering positive self-identity, a sense of our own community, connectivity and positive relational experiences, our individual and collective empowerment, optimism for a future that includes us. This is something we understand in SWAN, where the focus is on supporting autistic women in building community, and developing more positive narratives of their lived experiences. For autistic people, 'recovering' our mental health may continue to require changes to be made in society.

We do share with everyone a sense of community-held trauma. As individuals we understand that our own living conditions are not the same as others' and are grateful for any privileges we have. But there are those within our community who have been locked down with small children, with families who are not empathetic with us, with abusers, who have struggled to cope. Some are concerned they may have de-skilled in the period and will have difficulties going back to some of the activities they had learned to navigate such as using public transport, attending social engagements.

Those with children may have had very mixed experiences and also conflicted feelings about the future. It's been reported by some families their lives have been so much more relaxed and generally happy as their children are no longer being required to spend their days in environments that exhaust and damage them. Also, that they are no longer required to battle weekly/daily sometimes, with their child's school or LA staff. These are possibly families with the resources, both personal and financial, to entertain, to educate, to share important life skills such as cooking, or the expressive arts, with their children. They may have a garden or access to the outdoors. Others have struggled in lock-down with energetic, frustrated, anxious children. One of our emergency counselling service users has reported the counselling hasn't just supported her mental health but has had a calming and supportive impact on her whole family dynamic (she has 3 children, 2 of them autistic and is a single parent).

Many of us will struggle with a 'new normal' that appears already to be being interpreted so very differently by the wider population. That increases anxiety levels for us - we tend to be concrete thinkers and rule abiders and find the lack of clarity around the COVID-19 legislative guidance very difficult. We also find it very difficult to witness so many people around us apparently not complying with social distancing rules or wearing any kind of face covering, while gathering together in public spaces. So even in this context, 'recovery' and 'community' may hold very different meanings for different sections of the population. I hope this is helpful feedback and thanks for the opportunity to share some SWAN thoughts!

Dr Catriona Stewart 25.05.02

