

e-Interview



Dr Fiona Warner-Gale is joint Director of Associate Development Solutions Ltd, a company that offers bespoke solutions to service and professional development in children's mental health. She is also in the early stages of developing a social enterprise focusing on empowering children and young people to tackle the stigma related to mental health. In recognition of her

contribution to the field of children and young people's mental health, Fiona was nominated by the Department for Education to attend the Queen's Garden Party at Buckingham Palace in 2011. She was also selected from 60 000 nominations to be one of the UK's 8000 torchbearers who were honoured with carrying the Olympic Torch in the 2012 Olympics. In April 2012, Fiona was appointed as the Expert Advisor for Children and Young People to Time to Change, the major anti-stigma charity tackling mental health discrimination in England.

What are you working on today?

I am working on a qualitative evaluation of an initiative to tackle the stigma of mental health in schools led by Time to Change. Time to Change is England's biggest programme to tackle the stigma and discrimination associated with mental health. They have recently launched a young people's work stream, and schools across the West Midlands have taken part in a curriculum-led competition to encourage young people to come up with creative ideas to stamp out stigma and discrimination around mental health problems. Being commissioned to lead on this evaluation is particularly meaningful to me, as I have been researching the experiences of stigma in children and young people for the past 12 years, and I am a passionate ambassador for changing the way we see mental health for the better and in reducing the discrimination experienced as a result stigma. I have been really keen to make the issue of stigma something that young people want to shout out about. Being able to work with young people in this study means that we can talk about the issues that matter to them.

What is your idea of a perfect mental health service?

A service that has been co-designed and co-produced with its users. It would be accessible and located in a place where people are happy to be seen. It would work in partnership with its users to ensure that they were fully informed and able to make decisions about what is best for them. Ideally, there would be a real commitment to mental health promotion and working with communities to develop understanding about mental health and to stamp out stigma.

Which psychiatrist, living or dead, do you most admire?

Patrick Corrigan, an American professor of psychology who has been researching the stigma of mental health for over 15 years. His work on conceptual models of stigma and measuring stigma has been a major influence on current work in this field across the

world. I was recently lucky enough to hear him speak at a world congress on tackling stigma in Canada, where he talked openly about his personal experiences of mental health problems from an early age.

What do you consider to be your greatest achievement?

I was chosen to carry the Olympic Torch. I was astounded! It was a truly amazing experience and the support that I got from people all over the country was unimaginable.

What has been your most controversial idea?

To hand the responsibility for tackling the stigma of mental health to young people, in partnership with the adults around them. My framework for tackling stigma, developed from my PhD, is a multidimensional whole-systems approach that places children and young people in the driving seat to developing initiatives. It was piloted across England in six sites, with fantastic results. The framework can be found at www.chimat.org.uk/tacklingstigma.

Who would you most like to have dinner with and why?

Sir Ranulph Fiennes. He is truly a person who can overcome adversity and sees life as an endless challenge that is there to be conquered. Secretly, I would love to follow in his footsteps and walk to the South Pole.

What is the most important lesson that working with those with mental illness has taught you?

I don't think I realised how difficult it can be to ask for help when you have a mental health problem. Talking to the primary school-aged children and their parents gave me some insight into the emotional wrangles they went through in admitting to themselves that they might have a mental health problem and then dealing with how negatively they were treated by others. Having postnatal depression after the birth of my daughter 4 years ago made me realise that I also experienced the profound effects of stigma, in that it took a long time to really admit that I needed help, and only now have I begun to talk about it. We have to work to enable people to get help as early as they can if we are to reduce the impact of having a mental health problem on our quality of life.

What has been your biggest disappointment?

That we reinvent the wheel at lot of times, but we forget all the times it was actually working well.

What was the last book you read?

Bedlam: London and Its Mad, by Catharine Arnold. It gives a fantastic insight into the history of those considered 'mad' by society, focusing on the Bethlehem Hospital in London, founded in 1247. Its fascinating and sometimes brutal and horrific portrayals of the treatment of people with mental illness enable us to realise how far we have come in our attitudes towards mental illness, but remind us of how far we still have to go.

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