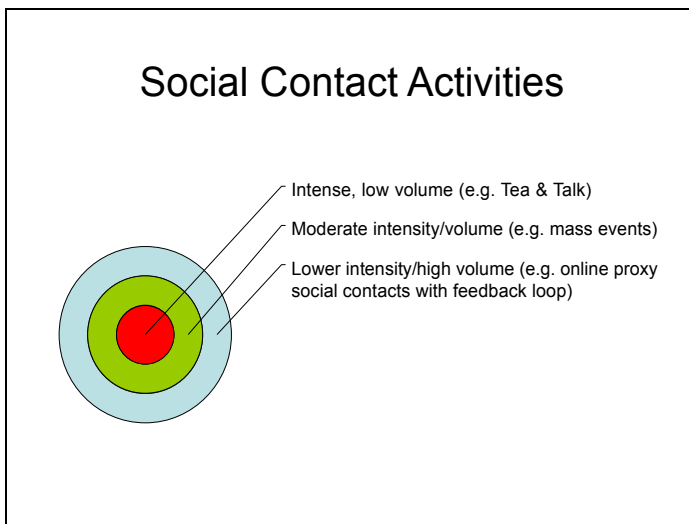


How social contact works

Research shows that people’s attitudes towards people with mental health problems are more likely to improve when they have the opportunity to learn, in the right context, from someone with personal experience of them. Time to Change wanted to create more opportunities for people to meet and learn from each other, either face to face or virtually. Engaging people in conversations about mental health can bring about lasting change; this is called social contact.

As the programme progressed, the approach to social contact shifted significantly. It took time to understand what social contact in this context meant, and it was sometimes misinterpreted as social interaction. Attracting members of the target audience to events where social contact could be delivered could be difficult, as the types of people that chose to attend were likely to already be sympathetic to the aims of Time to Change. The people that needed targeting probably wouldn’t choose to come to a mental health event, so by reaching out to people and taking the programme to them by popping up at shopping centres, football games or community festivals Time to Change reached more of its target audience.

Social contact activity was reviewed during the first phase and a scale of social contact identified. This ranged from: intense social contact that tended to take place over a period of time with a small number of people from the target audience; moderate social contact, for example short conversations that take place during events; and high volume social contact, for example watching a film of someone talking about their personal experiences.



A good example of social contact came through an Open Up project called Tea & Talk, (developed in Devon by Helen Hutchings). People with personal experience of

mental health problems visited workplaces to deliver a workshop where people were encouraged to talk openly about mental health over tea and cake. They were asked to make individual and organisational pledges, and they would subsequently be provided with support and resources to turn their new knowledge into stigma-busting action.

In the first phase Human Libraries were also a part of many of the social contact events. A Human Library is where people with different experiences volunteer to talk about these experiences to the general public. These people become Books in a library of human experience, where members of the public can choose to take them out and find out about those experiences. Yet another area where effective social contact took place was through Education Not Discrimination (END), where individuals with lived experience developed and delivered training to a selection of professionals on mental health and stigma. Their experiences fed into the training and were a central focus of sessions. These types of social contact worked as people felt of equal status and had a mutual goal, which research suggests are key components of effective social contact.

Additional Links:

- For more information on social contact, take a [look here](#).
- For more information on the theory behind social contact, care of the New Zealand anti-stigma campaign Like Minds Like Mine, take a [look here](#).

Lessons learnt

‘Social contact’ is a simple concept, but it can be complicated to explain and understand

Some people thought that by working with people with mental health problems in public areas they were creating social contact. When asked for examples of social contact, some Time to Change projects described using mainstream gyms for the activities they ran. This is not the type of social contact described in the programme targets; in order to count it would need to involve an open discussion about mental health. Social contact is about changing minds through sharing conversations in a meaningful way.

Reach the right people

The best examples of social contact reached people who didn't know much about mental health. For those people mental health was uncharted territory and social contact could create a safe place to discuss it. We knew many people hadn't talked about mental health problems before, and that mental health events were more likely to attract people closer to the issue, who weren't the primary audience for this activity. After reviewing this, the approach began to shift towards one of 'ambushing' people who might not come to a mental health event, for example with events in town centres and at community festivals, which reached a broader range of people without any understanding of mental health problems. Social contact took place in places of work, play and worship.

Keep social contact simple

Effective social contact events often focused very clearly on one message and goal. These events were carefully organised to make sure participants knew what their role was and what support was available.

The strength of social contact is the experience of individuals

People with lived experience of mental health problems took leadership roles in effective social contact, and by describing their experiences they broke down barriers

around mental health problems, and supported peers while they did so. It was particularly important for people who didn't know someone with a mental health problem to see people with mental health problems for who they are. Briefings ensured that people sharing their experiences knew what was expected of them, the key messages of Time to Change and how to end a conversation if it became uncomfortable.

Running events

A large number of events were organised in the first four years, ranging from small to large. Some events were planned, developed and run by Time to Change; some were organised in partnership with others; and many other events were run using the Event Box materials that the programme had produced.

The most effective events were those where people with lived experience of mental health problems were either running or very actively involved in the event. Events often involved bringing together people with and without mental health problems to talk about mental health. Our own evaluation was beginning to show us that this was a good way to break down barriers around mental health problems and improve public attitudes.

Events were often run in partnership with supporters and stakeholders, so the following is just a sample of what was learnt overall.

Lessons learnt

Work in partnership

We worked in partnership with many organisations from a range of sectors, particularly in the early years. Securing the support from mental health and social care organisations was vital. Local leadership also gave events authenticity and embedded campaign messages locally. Local groups and organisations attracted local people, and secured venues through personal connections. This was as true for small community based organisations as for large regional organisations.

Make the role of volunteers clear

Volunteers were crucial to the success of anti-stigma events, and as such it was important to provide them with guidance and support, and reinforce key messages. Increased training and briefing also provided guidance for volunteers on how to end a conversation if it became uncomfortable or difficult, and made them aware of the support available at the event and afterwards.

Don't push people to disclose mental health problems

Though Time to Change ensured that events created an environment where it was safe to do so, volunteers were never asked to disclose their mental health status unless they felt comfortable doing so. The decision was in their hands, and feedback suggested this felt uniquely empowering. The peer support of people with similar experiences also helped.

Reach out to diverse audiences

Social contact can be a good way of tailoring activity for events to reach a wide range of people. Running these events provided more opportunities for community engagement through social contact, for example the pilot social marketing campaign in Harrow ran events held around the cultural calendar that would appeal to that community.

Events held at Brighton pride allowed the programme to reach a wide spread of people, particularly people in the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community.

Don't assume everyone can come to you

Not everyone was able to or wanted to travel to attend an event, so it was important to take events out to people. This is relevant not only in terms of where events were held, but also how they were communicated. Tweeting about events and posting photos on Facebook allowed people to feel a part of the activity, even if they couldn't attend them in person.

You can't always control your brand

The brand of the stakeholder organisation running an event in a particular town might get more recognition than Time to Change itself. They might also choose to deliver a campaign in a different way, but the important thing is that message delivery is consistent and that the event delivers meaningful and effective social contact (the focus is therefore not on brand awareness of Time to Change).

Make event materials affordable and accessible

Roadshow sets were created especially for Time to Change, with areas for photos, access to Facebook and sofas to sit on. Sets were branded with Time to Change materials and travelled around the country attracting attention from passers-by. Though successful, the sets were heavy and expensive to use, limiting the use of them – both internally and externally.

There was also the event in a box materials, printed resources and films that were freely available for people to use. All of these were free of charge to support the vital work undertaken by a wide range of individuals, communities and organisations, and were used in large numbers.