

A Life That Works?

If you are employed supporting people with learning difficulties, please consider and answer the following questions:-

Do you have a personal diary/agenda/planner that you use?

Would you be devastated if you misplaced it?

Does each person that you support have a personal diary/agenda/planner?

Would it have the same impact if they misplaced it?

My guess is that, for the first two questions, the answer is yes and thereafter the story is somewhat different. Perhaps the diary is a good metaphor for the 'them' and 'us' culture that we have created in service land.

We keep our own diaries, plan the time that we spend on work, domestic duties and leisure so that we can enjoy the maximum pleasure from the time that we have available whilst doing the things that we need to do to maintain our lifestyles.

For many people who use our services, staff usually keep diaries or planners for them with little or no input from the person themselves. People have no ownership over the very tool that shapes their day, their



week and their lives and rely on others to tell them what they are doing on an on going basis.

At a workshop Values Into Action Scotland ran in January 2010 in partnership with ENABLE Scotland, we asked participants, all of whom are employed in the human services sector to write out their personal agenda or calendar for a particular month and then to do the same for someone who uses their services.



We then compared the two calendars and found that:-

Staff calendars varied from week to week.

The calendars of people who use services were virtually identical from week to week.

Staff calendars showed a range of activities including work, organised activities, spending time with friends and hobbies.

The calendars of people who use services were much more task orientated, for example, shopping, housework etc.

Staff could change when they did things where it suited them, for example, I will go for food shopping on Friday as I will be out all day on Saturday.

People who use services agendas were pretty rigid and much less spontaneous.

Staff agendas showed a wide range of evening and weekend activities according to their personal preferences.

The calendars of people who use services showed little or no evening or weekend activities.

I don't know about you, but this rang enormous warning bells for me! I would urge you to try this activity. Plot out your own calendar for any given month and then do the same for each person that uses your services. When you have completed the calendars, ask the question 'Is this a life that works?'



My guess is that for yourself, the answer will pretty much be yes or at least you know what practical steps you can take to address the situation. For people who use our service, the answer is likely to be no. Herein the challenge lies.

We have to do everything in our power, as service providers, to change this, to support people to do meaningful things independently in their local communities so that, if we look at the two calendars, it is impossible to tell who is supported and who is the supporter?

When helping people to plan out their calendars, it is useful to think about the following headings to categorise the kinds of things that people may choose to become involved in:-

Formal Organisations: clubs, civic groups, churches, service groups

Regular Organised Events: ball games, markets, concert series

Episodic Organised Events: concerts, festivals, fairs, town celebrations

Seasonal Events: Christmas skating in the town square, The Fringe Festival, Edinburgh

Work-Related Recreation: Employee parties, employee five a side team

Community Recreation: YMCA, parks, museums, library

Commercial Recreation: cinemas, bowling alleys, amusement parks

Church/Religious Events: regular services, religious holidays

Personal Interests: hobbies, fishing, golf

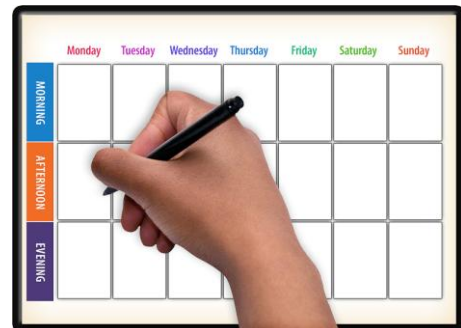
Family & Friend Activities: holidays, birthdays

Interpersonal Activities: dating, hanging out, visiting friends



Perhaps, the final point in this topic is the most important of all. When helping people to plan their activities and path towards truly independent living, it is crucial that we take account of the experience, personality, skills and interests of the person to help them realise their dreams and goals.

People will only have active and meaningful lives if the things that they are involved in make sense to them in terms of who they are and where they want to be as a person. If we can get all of this right then we will never fear the question 'Is this a life that works?' when looking at the calendar or agenda of anyone who uses our services.



Written by Norma Curran acknowledging the work of Mike Callahan, MG & A in developing the concept of Community Calendars.