

Psychology and the benefits system

Thank you.

Thank you for inviting me to your conference, and thank you for giving me the opportunity to open the day.

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It is a fundamental element of my understanding of human psychology that ... our thoughts, our emotions, our behaviour and therefore our mental health ... depend on how we make sense of the world... but that this framework of understanding which has, of course, has itself been and continues to be shaped by our experiences.

Essentially, things happen to us, we make sense of those events and respond to them, and there are consequences.

There is abundant evidence that inequity, debt, and unemployment affect our mental health. When we are in poor quality work, unsupported, stressed and unrewarded, our mental health suffers. When we are in debt, our mental health suffers. If we are made unemployed, or if we are faced with insecure employment, our mental health suffers.

And there is a lot of reason to believe that the policies we choose to implement can also impact on our mental health – which we'll hear today.

- sanctions
- cuts in benefits
- social services cuts

For us as psychologists, then, we have a lot to offer.

There's prevention – primary and secondary

Improving the economy, improving workers' rights, implementing a living wage, avoiding austerity,

But also providing proper benefits, training, support for people who lose their jobs

Perhaps for me, removing conditionality in the benefits and support systems

In our present system, conditionality is used – in my opinion – wholly inappropriately. We punish people for NOT doing things, getting a job, filling in a CV, attending an interview, undertaking training... but, of course, punishment is completely ineffective in helping people

make positive choices. Punishment – sanctions – cannot help people make positive choices. It just doesn't work that way, psychologically

For me, as a clinical psychologist, we've more to offer in the field of mental health

Despite the effects of austerity, I remain optimistic

I trained 25 years ago now, and I do believe that, slowly, slowly, a psychosocial perspective on mental health is gaining traction in our NHS and political world.

That's obviously my agenda, and I'm frustrated at the rate of change, and I am old and tired, but I think the direction of travel is positive.

That is important, here, because my understanding of what psychological health and wellbeing actually means includes not only an understanding that what we are discussing are NORMAL, even everyday, and certainly understandable human responses to life's traumas.

This is a paean of praise to Mirabai Swingler's "only us campaign" And to Jackie Dillon's powerful requirement that "don't ask me what's wrong with me, ask what's happened to me".

But also an expectation that, with support, we can achieve our potential in life – whatever we (and not Tory Ministers) choose that to me

I have an optimistic view.

I am slightly worried by ONE possible response to the agenda of the Department for Work and Pensions – and I see echoes of this response even in respect to recent proposed changes to ESA rules – is to point out that people really, really, are disabled... they won't recover, they're really ill...

Well, I'm sorry, but I'm not so sure.

I'm not sure that I agree with either the idea that people are ill, or that we should – to enable them to receive benefits – argue that they are beyond hope.

I also have concerns about some forms of opposition to the idea that work is good for us.

I understand the politics – the fact that a mantra such as “work is good for you” can easily, under the wrong kind of politics, turn into putting the idle back to work or making moral judgements about people who are unable to work.

But work is, actually good for people

Valued, valuable work.

Work which earns a living wage, with responsible employers.

Yes, I think work is a good thing

I am pleased to see more people – including politicians – supporting IPS, Individual Placement and Support, to help people – should they wish it - achieve steady employment in mainstream competitive jobs.

PERSONALLY, and this is NOT BPS policy, I think we should pursue the policy of a basic, unconditional, income for all citizens. This would have the rather wonderful consequence of making work genuinely beneficial – because, with a basic income, you would only gain from working, but would have little to fear from unemployment.

So,... where is the British Psychological Society in all this ?

Yes, we ARE talking to the DWP

We are engaged in serious discussions about these issues

These aren't secret or even private, and we're certainly not colluding.

The discussions involve civil servants, occasionally politicians, but also people like the Institute for Employment Studies, Medical Royal Colleges, other charities.

They aren't in the basements of the MI6 bunker - we had discussions in Starbucks at the ICC in Birmingham with colleagues from Rethink, the Royal College of Psychiatrists and MPs.

We don't give a running commentary because democracy has both transparency and privacy woven into it and principles of both transparency and discretion are important.

Yes, we have journalists, even Wikileaks and Freedom of Information requests

But we also have

Privacy – for my medical records, for example, and for my ‘off-the-record’ chats to journalists. I really don't want various people who troll me on Twitter to have access to my private thoughts on the wisdom of re-joining the Labour Party or the reasons I resigned.

We have Chatham House rules, we have ‘sandbox’ events where ideas can be freely shared, but we also have colleagues in the civil service who – under established democratic processes, take the advice they are given and report back to Ministers, who may or may not agree, but who are, ultimately, answerable to voters... not to the attendees of any one particular meeting or the denizens of the darker recesses of Social media

We're not colluding

We point out the failings – technical failings – of the Work Capability Assessments

And we point out the flaws in the underlying philosophy
We argue for reform to the over-arching system of Employment Support Allowance, and we have actually – with colleagues – won arguments

BPSOfficial

British Psychological Society welcomes Damian Green's announcement on Employment Support Allowance testing
[ow.ly/p7KG304QhxR #CPC16](https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/p7KG304QhxR/#CPC16)

[04/10/2016, 15:42](#)

There's a role for protest, for boycotts, even.
But the BPS has a role of engagement, and I think we're quite effective at it.

But one request, please....

When we have these discussions, it's easy to get pessimistic.
Because we need benefits, and our benefits are under threat, we need to remind people of our reliance on benefits.

And that's true, but... I need to emphasise optimism.

Especially in mental health, where I reject the pessimism of the disease model of psychiatry.

I don't think people with disabilities should be forced to do anything, let alone work.

But I DO want to live in a society that enables me, my son and daughter, my brother, to contribute to the fullest of their potential. No coercion, but opportunity.

So that's my gentle point... I am in no sense a supporter of coercion, but I am a supporter of opportunity

Thank you... have a great conference