Norfolk Safeguarding Adults Board Manager's Blog

November 2017 (Part 1) * see page 3

What 'insulates' a person against abuse and harm?

Earlier in the year I had some major roof repairs done on the house. It was also an ideal time to also strengthen the floor to make the attic space more useable. In preparation for the builders, I had to clear the loft space. Out came the storage boxes and then the insulation to expose the ceiling joists. It was a loose 'cotton wool' type of insulation that had deteriorated and lifting it out was a filthy, tiring job.

I spent nearly four days crawling around the attic, which gave me a *lot* of time to think about insulation. It's been around since the beginning of civilization. Early humans used wool and animal skins as clothing. We built homes of wood, stone, earth, and other materials to protect us against the cold winter and the heat of summer. Ancient Greeks and Romans discovered asbestos, and the Romans used cork for insulation. We now have artificial mineral fibres to keep heat in and cold out of our homes.

Just as we insulate (or protect) our house from heat loss, how can 'insulate' a person against abuse and neglect?

Or to ask the question in a different way, what makes a person vulnerable to abuse and neglect? While recognising that vulnerability is a multidimensional issue, the Department of Health (2011) argues that it is affected by three key factors:

- Personal circumstances – including (but not limited to) disability or ill health
- Risks from the environment
- Resilience factors

What situations or factors put a person at increased risk of being abused, ie make them vulnerable? Writing in the British Medical Journal Boland B, Burnage J, Chowhan H (BMJ 2013) list these factors:
- lack of mental capacity
- increasing age
- being physically dependent on others
- low self-esteem
- previous history of abuse [violent behaviour, alcohol or substance misuse or mental illness]

- negative experiences of disclosing abuse
- social isolation with limited contact with friends, family or neighbours
- lack of access to health and social services or high-quality information

The presence of one or more of these factors does not automatically imply that abuse will occur, but they may increase the likelihood of abuse occurring. To the above list I would also add:

- where there is an unequal power relationship between the abused and the abuser, or the latter exerts physical, emotional or financial control
- living in the same household as a known abuser
- financial difficulties, often leading to substandard living conditions
- differences in communication or a breakdown in communication
- carer stress

From Safeguarding Adults Reviews we have learnt about factors which create a 'space' in which abuse and harm is more likely, including:
- poor or a lack of communication between services, including not sharing important information
- ineffective partnership working between services
- those receiving care and support or their families and friends not being involved in decisions made about their care
- a failure to identify signs of abuse
- lack of management support or presence
- limited learning and development opportunities for workers
- poor staff recruitment processes.

So, knowing all this, how might we protect or insulate a person from abuse or harm as we go about our day-to-day jobs? For example:

- by simply building up a person's social connections by one we can help drive down social isolation
- we can work in a way which supports a person with their decision making
- if someone lacks capacity to make a specific decision at a specific time, we can support them with best-interest decisions in the meantime
- we can discuss the list above with our colleagues so we all know what to look out for
- we can support each other to take action against abuse and neglect.

Walter Lloyd-Smith
NSAB Board Manager, 06 November 2017

* a number of regular readers have got in touch, noticing there were no blogs for August and September. So, to try and make amends, November's blog will have two parts, here is part one. Part two is called *I want you as a 'safeguarding multiplier' or 'tell two, protect many'*.