



Fire and risk factors research

Mental illness, drug and alcohol misuse

28 June 2011

A qualitative research approach

Face to face, in-depth conversations with service users

Local Mind Association and drug / alcohol drop-in centres

Transparent approach

45 participants in total

September – October 2010

Fire risk often overshadowed by other concerns for participants

Isolation

Money

problems

Relapse

Self-harm

Fire

Relationship

Overdose

breakdown

Stigma

Crime

*Suicidal
thoughts*

Violence

Low self esteem

**(Mental)
illness**

Fire risk often overshadowed by other concerns for participants



*Overdosing. I've mean I've had a few close calls with overdoses and my drug use was getting into crime, I was [involved in] a lot of crime.
(Alcohol / drug misuse)*

I get very frightened to go out, I won't answer my phone and people come to see me like friends and I just won't let them in. I get this voice in my head, punishing me in my head. (Mental illness)

Research indicates fire *is* a key risk among these groups

Fire related incidents, near misses widespread
– forgetfulness a key issue

Forgetfulness

Mental illness

Distracted (e.g. TV), the illness itself, alcohol / substance misuse

Kitchen

*I'm frightened of leaving cookers on when I'm ill.
(Mental illness)*

Other appliances

*I've left the oven on, I've left the gas ring on, I've left the fire on. I've left the fire on in the main living room all day.
(Mental illness)*

Examples of how forgetfulness heightens risk for those with **mental illness**

I left the stove on in the kitchen, I burned the kitchen down. . . . I was in bed. I totally forgot, everything was black and there was flames everywhere. (Mental illness)

Well I've had [several] chip pan fires. . . . You go away and do something else and forget about it and then you've got it going up haven't you? But I've been lucky; I've always had wet towels. (Mental illness)

I left the frying pan on and there was a little bit of oil in it, only a little bit and I went to do something else and [then] . . . the kitchen's full of black smoke, and they called the fire brigade. . . . This happened [a few] times. (Mental illness)

We've had near misses with tea towels going up in flames. . . . Forgot. Didn't realise the gas was on, you've finished, you've left the gas on and you haven't switched it off, you've just slung a tea towel down and whoosh. (Mental illness)

Various other factors heighten risks for those with **mental illness**

Caring for others



- Preparing meals for elderly parents
- Caring for child with mental illness



... [The child] threw [an item] in the fire and it exploded, it gutted all my home. (Mental illness)

Ability to gauge risk



- Deactivating smoke alarms
- Also applies more generally to ability to make good decisions



[The smoke alarm] will go off and it'll drive me that mad that I do it with a sweeping brush, and I've hit it that much now that it's actually hanging off the wall. (Mental illness)

Various other factors heighten risks for those with **mental illness**

(Self)
medication



- Alcohol / drug misuse leads to poor decision-making, drowsiness
- Side effects of prescribed medication



Sometimes when I get very wrought I drink, because that's the only way I cope [also a carer for son with schizophrenia]. . . . I'd burned a hole in the pot and I didn't even smell it, I was in such a mess myself. (Mental illness)

Smoking




- Combined with forgetfulness, drowsiness



I must have just nodded off and the cigarette must have burned down a bit and burned my fingers, brought me around a bit quick. . . . [The medication] must have kicked in a little bit. (Mental illness)

Combination of factors raise risk of fire among alcohol / drug misusers

Smoking, drug preparation, intoxication increase risk
- often combined with cooking food



Sleep, lose
consciousness

Intoxication, 'gauching': lighter / candle
(tea lights) / cigarette / cooker turned on

Gosh, terrible. I mean with heroin you fall to sleep quite a lot, you nod off, and I mean I was in a situation where I was in bed and my partner's woke me up and [my partner's] screaming at me because I'd fallen asleep with a fag in my hand and the bed was on fire. (Alcohol / drug misuse)

I was under the influence and I sat down, left on a pan, . . . and before I knew it I fell asleep and the thing had boiled right through, bang, set a fire and when I woke up there was people banging on the door and everything, there was smoke all over the place . . . flames and everything coming off the cooker, the place was demolished. (Alcohol / drug misuse)

Forgetfulness, lack of concentration also occur among **alcohol misusers**



Forgetfulness

Food cooking, lit cigarette, lit candle

*I used to be that blotto, I used to shove [food] into the oven and just forget about it and go to bed. Next minute, you wake up and there's all smoke everywhere, because you're that blotto you forget all about it.
(Alcohol / drug misuse)*

You're not focused on things and you're quite lackadaisical and, you know, you don't think about leaving sometimes maybe your cigarette in the ashtray or a candle burning because you're just not thinking about things. (Alcohol / drug misuse)

Reckless behaviour, ignoring risk also lead to fire related incidents among **alcohol / drug misusers**

Reckless
behaviour

- Deactivating smoke alarms
- Using electric appliance in bathroom
- Playing with fire, 'hot knives'
- Attempting to use two appliances in one socket rather than buy new plug (heroin user)

*I smashed my smoke alarm. . . . It went off and I was trying to press the button to stop it and it wouldn't switch off so I "bosh" got it off the ceiling. I shouldn't have done that.
(Alcohol / drug misuse)*

You bring a heater into the bathroom, I've done that, an electric heater in the bathroom, which is not a very smart thing to do. (Alcohol / drug misuse)

Reducing the risk

Strategies can work although mostly through first-hand incident experience

Developing routines, plans

Getting rid of chip pans

Changing **behaviours**
(e.g. cooking, smoking)



Sometimes result of FRS
/ HFSC intervention

*I was shown [an escape route] by a Fire Chief so I know, I wanted him to show me before he left my house [following fire].
(Mental illness)*

... Just I learnt and ever since then I won't go near the cooker when I'm pissed, I won't go near it, I don't even attempt it. I go down the chippy or, you know, stay clear of the cooker. (Alcohol / drug misuse)

Reducing the risk

Widespread interest in receiving support

LMA clients especially interested in keeping Firebrake Wales checklist

Many positive towards idea of HFSC

Idea of **ongoing support** prevalent

Service users generally trust service providers to play role in ongoing support

In principle, CDATs, LMAs open to some form of collaboration

Fire Safety Checklist

Following these basic fire safety tips and adopting them into your daily routine will help to make you safer in your home.

- ✓ **Test your smoke alarms every week**
Remember, a smoke alarm can only warn you if it works properly.
- ✓ **Plan an escape route**
Plan how you would get out if there was a fire in your home. Remember to keep the hallway, stairways and doors clear so that it is easy to get out in an emergency.
- ✓ **Have a night time routine**
Every night, remember to close all doors, switch off and unplug appliances. Keep a telephone and mobility aids close by if you need them.
- ✓ **Take extra care when cooking**
Don't have anything near the cooker that could catch fire. Remember to use a timer or something else to remind you not to forget about your cooking.
- ✓ **Take extra care with open flames and heaters**
Always use a fire guard and make sure candles aren't on or near anything that could catch fire. Don't leave a heater too close to anything and never cover it.
- ✓ **Store electric blankets either flat or rolled-up**
- ✗ **Don't overload plug sockets**
And never use them if wet.
- ✗ **Never smoke in bed**
Always take proper care with cigarettes, especially if you're tired or unwell and put them out properly.
- ✗ **Never use your electric blanket at the same time as a hot water bottle**

Who can help?

If you want to know more about keeping safer from fire in your home you could talk to your support worker or contact Firebrake Wales (the fire safety charity) on 01833 654000.

Both could arrange for you to have a Home Fire Safety Check if you wish. This is a free service offered in Wales by the Fire and Rescue Services.

REMEMBER - NEVER fight a fire yourself

If a fire starts in your home, leave as quickly as possible, phone 999 and ask for the Fire Service

Reducing the risk

Widespread interest in receiving support

I'd put [the Checklist] on the back of the door, one of the doors where the tea is or the coffee or the milk or the sugar. You open it and you see it all the time. (Mental illness)

People should come in and talk to the mental health people and explain it with them, even if they've got support workers, they should come in with their support workers then, . . . and then that should go on the care plan as well. (Mental illness)

It would be good to have a chat every six months with your support worker and they could give you a leaflet to re-enforce the home check. (Alcohol / drug misuse)

We could talk to [Firebrake Wales] regarding their strategy and where we might fit in, if they've got any specific ideas. (CDAT Manager)



Diolch
Thank you