How using PAM supports Social Prescribing and Link Workers

PAM is all about making sure our support is ideally matched to the person we are working with. PAM is focused on helping people to get better at what they do to look after their health and wellbeing. The ideas behind it are very similar to those of social prescribing.

PAM stands for Patient Activation Measure. It is a set of 13 questions that have been designed and validated to measure how skilled, knowledgeable or confident someone feels to self manage their health conditions, at that moment in time.

‘Designed and validated’ means tested in multiple experiments to prove that these exact set of questions, asked in this way, are the best set of questions for the job.

‘Self- Manage- means the things that people do for themselves that contribute to better health and wellbeing for them. This might be on their own or with support from friends, family or carers.

We say ‘feels’, and ‘at that moment in time’, because what you are asking people to answer is their view of their situation right now. We know people’s perspective of themselves in their current situation is very important.

“ it ‘ain’t what you do it’s the way that you do it.......and that’s what gets results”.

In order to get meaningful and useful answers from people it is important people feel safe to answer honestly. They need to give it some thought. If they understand and trust that this is important and designed to support and help them (rather than criticize or penalize them), it really helps.

When someone has answered the questions, you need to enter the results into a spreadsheet to reveal their activation score (percentage) and level (1-4). You have to use the spreadsheet as the questions are all weighted slightly differently. This means some questions are a little more important than others. The higher the percentage or level, the more skilled, knowledgeable and confident they feel about themselves. There are digital tools coming out that will do this scoring automatically to make this easier.

Multiple studies from around the world (including the UK), show that people’s activation scores match well with their health and wellbeing outcomes. This means that the higher the PAM score the more likely they are to do well.

Social prescribing helps to address the non-health factors that contribute to how well someone feels. We know this is crucial in building activation. So PAM is a good measure of the main things link workers and social prescribing aim to influence.

Emerging evidence also suggests that using ‘coaching’ and ‘strength- based’ approaches help build activation. Coaching means supporting people to discover what works for them rather than expecting them to just follow instructions. ‘Strength-based’ means building on what people are already good at, starting with what they feel matters most.
3 specific ways PAM can support social prescribing – TAILOR, SEGMENT, TRACK

1. **Tailoring your approach to the individual- people can learn well**

If a link worker understands someone’s level of skill, knowledge and confidence to self-manage they can tailor their approach. In social prescribing, we are often supporting people to learn new ways of thinking and acting, and building their confidence to do this. People need to learn at the right level for them. Do they need a very gentle beginners approach, or are they already an expert and just in need of a ‘top up’? Knowing where and how to start stops you from overwhelming people who are underconfident, and patronizing or boring people who already quite skilled. Although the evidence base for this is still emerging in health and social care, there is strong evidence from education and behaviour change science that backs this approach.

**Spend your time in the best way** - For example: As a link worker you might need to speed a little more time with people at lower levels of activation, as you might need to go at a slower pace for them. Those at higher levels of activation might do well with some simple signposting, as they are much more capable of following through on opportunities themselves.

2. **Segmenting the population- making sure people in the right’ class’ for them**

Building on the learning approach above if you know someone’s activation level upfront you can make sure they are in the right ‘class’, pitched at the right level. If people are at a low level of activation they may not be ready engage at all right now, and the first job is simply to support them to find a reason why looking after their health might be useful to them. At the other end of the scale you might decide that some people are already so expert that it might be best to set them up to support other people, perhaps in a peer support role.

Sometimes there might be value in mixing up people of different abilities, sometimes not. Each service can probably judge for themselves, but it helps to have the knowledge about who you are working with, so you can match people to the right class, classmates and teachers, and use your limited resources wisely.

3. **Tracking progress- Are we doing something useful?**

When you seek to help someone, it is always important to know if what we are doing is working. Similarly, if someone is dropping in activation it can be important to explore why. Tracking changes in PAM is not about criticizing or blaming the person or the service, it is about generating an honest and realistic understanding of how people’s lives are changing. This can help to make the best use of everyone’s time. Patients tell us that it’s important to recognise that failure is OK and normal. Understanding why support has not helped informs future efforts.

**Improving PAM is an early marker of future success**

Everyone likes to see progress, it makes us feel good. Social prescribing is especially good at building people’s confidence and skills and knowledge, so it makes sense to use a tool designed to pick up these changes. We know people shift how they feel before they change what they do, and what they achieve. It can help draw in funding if you can show you have made helpful changes. NHS England is committed to the use of PAM, as a useful tool.

**Seeing an increase in PAM is often the first step towards a better future.**