

Engaging with mental health research in very late life

Overview and Context

This case study outlines the learning from the public engagement project "Engaging with mental health research in very late life". The project was led by Dr Rachael Frost, Post-doctoral Research Fellow in Primary Care and Population Health. The project involved running discussion groups in day centres with older people, to discuss the topics of wellbeing in later life and what facilitates or hinders this. This was followed up by a photo project "Smile" in each day centre, where service users were given disposable cameras and were asked to photograph things that made them happy and things that were important to them.

This project was funded under the UCL Public Engagement Unit Beacon Bursary funding scheme. This case study identifies key findings from the project and highlights learning for any similar projects of this nature.

At the start, the project had the following aims:

1. To share what is known about how common mental health issues in very late life and the services that may be available, with service users.
2. To elicit priorities for future research in this area from service users.
3. To elicit how best to disseminate results to people in future.

After conducting the first discussion group, the project team realised that they had set their expectations very high in terms of the depth of discussion that was possible within a group of frailer older people during a single session. It was particularly challenging for more abstract topics, such as future research in this area. They decided to modify their aims. The revised aims were to:

1. To share what is known about how common mental health issues in very late life are and the services that may be available, with service users.
2. Explore what is important to people to maintain mental health in later life and what therapies people might find acceptable or useful at this point in life
3. Discover more effective ways to engage with frailer older people on this topic.

What happened?

The project team carried out four discussion groups in day centres with 3-6 participants each, to discuss the topics of wellbeing in later life and what facilitates or hinders this. This was followed up by a photo project "Smile" in each centre, in which 6-7 service users were given disposable cameras and were asked to photograph things that made them happy and things that were important to them. They developed the photos and created a display within each centre and talked through these with the service users.



Facts and Figures

- The total project value was **£610**, funded by the Beacon Bursary grant scheme
- **29** service users were involved in the project (16 in discussion groups, 13 in the photo project)
- **2** day centres were project partners: Broxbourne Day Centre, Cheshunt and Alsen Day Centre, Finsbury Park

Emerging themes from the evaluation

Engaging with mental health research in very late life was a pilot project using public engagement to explore an under researched area to inform future research and practice.

Monitoring and evaluation ran throughout the project - and the team have spent time reflecting upon the key lessons learnt from running this project. Their reflections include the following:

- The initial aims were somewhat ambitious in terms of the information they could feasibly exchange with service users in a single session. This may have been achieved by closer liaison with day centres regarding the content of the discussion groups.
- The team learnt to plan a range of activities across different sessions to provide different methods of engagement. Initial plans tried to include too much in one session, which made them cautious about including more creative methods, although these were received well when tried. Carrying out the photo project first may have provided a discussion topic for later sessions.
- If they were going to run the project again, they would organise a number of sessions over a sustained period. Ongoing engagement was received positively by day centres and increased the teams' familiarity with service users. Though the team had discussions with day centre managers about what may be feasible with service users, having a meeting involving as many day centre staff as possible prior to starting the project may have facilitated communication, clarified their aims and provided further input in feasible ways of engaging.

Impacts from the project

This public engagement project has informed the context of a systematic review of non-pharmacological interventions for older people with functional limitations and depression or anxiety. The relevance, focus and range of interventions will be compared to the findings of the discussion groups as to what people said was important for their mental wellbeing.

This project has also informed the topic guide and recruitment materials for a qualitative interview study with frailer older people regarding depression and anxiety. This engagement project has helped the team to develop successful ways to broach the sensitive topic of mental health, highlighted potential areas that they might find difficult and informed how the researchers can best explain the study to potential participants.

A number of ideas have emerged from this project. In future, the project team would like to develop more effective ways to engage with older men, who were particularly challenging to engage in this project.

Learning from the Process

What worked well?

- Engaging with service users: Service users were generally happy to talk to the team at any time and see what the project was about, as well as to leave if they didn't find it interesting!

- Discussion groups: these worked well when questions were very focussed, small groups (3-4 people rather than 5-6 to give everyone an opportunity to talk), when a staff member helped to facilitate the groups, when group participants knew each other fairly well and when using known examples (e.g. a friend with depression).

- Photo project: This worked well when people had good support and encouragement from day centre staff in taking photos, and had people and activities to take photos of, rather than simply objects.

What could be done differently?

- Engaging with day centres: The team had difficulties engaging with a day centre who they thought would be interested through existing contacts. They resolved this through using other connections and through sending emails to centres they thought may be interested.

- Engaging with service users: Engaging men within this project was challenging. Within discussion groups (particularly all-male groups), it was difficult to get men talking about mental health, despite approaching the topic from different angles.

- Finding creative ways to engage: the team realised that alternative ways to engage would complement the discussion groups significantly. They introduced drawing, writing and using stickers on postcards and the photo project.

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