

A Participatory Action Research Project to Explore and Respond to Loss from Mental Illness: Insights for Occupational Therapy Practice

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Introduction: Mental illness can engender a great deal of loss due to symptoms and factors such as stigma. Occupational therapists work closely with people who have mental illness, yet it is unclear how people with a mental illness respond to losses and what resources are needed to support this process. In line with progression towards a recovery-oriented mental health system in Australia, consumers are recognised as being central to the planning, implementation and evaluation of services. The use of participatory action research (PAR) in the current study reflects this philosophy. The purpose of this study was to explore, implement and reflect upon strategies for responding to the losses that arise from mental illness.

Objectives: The objectives of this presentation are twofold: Firstly, to present strategies for responding to loss from mental illness, as identified by mental health consumers, and; Second, to illuminate the process, benefits and limitations of PAR in this study and provide recommendations for occupational therapists conducting PAR projects in mental health settings.

Methods: Seven people attending a community mental health centre participated in a series of focus groups and creative activities to explore and generate change in the topic area. Consistent with a participatory approach, participants were engaged as co-researchers throughout the study. Data were analysed thematically and member checking occurred.

Results: Participants experienced a range of losses, as well as social exclusion and disempowerment. As a research approach, PAR had numerous benefits, emphasising participation, relationship building, critical reflection and empowerment. Challenges of using PAR in this setting included striking a balance between maximising participation, a key principle of PAR, and ethical considerations around safeguarding participants' well-being.

Conclusion: Due to stigma and the nature of some losses, such as lost confidence and relationships, people with a mental illness may experience loss in isolation. PAR provides a forum which is both supportive and respectful to participants and aligns well with key occupational therapy philosophies and the recovery approach.

Contribution to the practice of occupational therapy: PAR offers occupational therapists a research approach that promotes relationship building, reflection and personal and social transformation.