

Arts, identity & recovery

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Community-based arts activities and the identity change recovery process from serious mental illness: A realist review

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Introduction

Emerging evidence in support of arts and serious mental illness (SMI) recovery indicates numerous potential mechanisms involved, making it difficult to determine what works and for whom (Fancourt et al., 2021). In particular, the recovery process of identity change is often overlooked within mental health service evaluations (Williams et al., 2012), yet has been empirically identified as a key process in personal recovery from SMI (Leamy et al., 2011).

This research has been developed in partnership with the charity Creative Minds (South-West Yorkshire NHS Foundation Trust), who identified that community-based arts activities positively influences identity (Walters, 2015). Further research is needed to understand how and why arts activities influence the identity change recovery process.

Research question

How, why, and in what context do community-based arts interventions enable the identity change recovery process from serious mental illness (SMI)?

Methodology

A realist literature review was conducted between January – September 2021. A realist review is a type of systematic review that aims to discover causal relationships between specific contexts (C) and mechanisms (M) that explain outcomes (O), to develop theory about how and why an intervention is successful (Pawson & Tilley, 1997).

Synthesis & results

42 iterative searches were conducted between January – September 2021 on 9 databases, resulting in a final 22 citations contributing to theory development. Extracted data was synthesised using realist logic. An expert panel was consulted to ensure theory salience.



Findings

The programme theory developed from this review is outlined briefly below and highlights the importance of a safe and empowering intervention context in order to activate the mechanism pathways of coping, connectedness and overcoming challenges. Not all mechanism pathways may be activated, however they all contribute to self-awareness that enables identity change.

Programme theory



If you live with SMI, feeling stuck and isolated (Context),



...then a safe and empowering arts for mental health community group (Intervention context) engages (the mechanisms)
1. coping with illness
2. connecting to others
3. overcoming personal challenges.



I was a different person.
This develops positive self-awareness (mechanism 4), which allows you to redefine yourself beyond illness (Outcome).

Conclusion

Several key points can be drawn from the findings of this review:

1. A safe and empowering context is essential to activate mechanisms of change by addressing the disempowering health inequalities faced by people living with SMI.
2. The mechanisms identified link to transformative learning, that has been found to develop self-awareness and identity change (Montgomery et al., 2008).
3. Creative arts activities may be a particularly effective transformative activity within SMI recovery.

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