

Supported Socialisation: Friendship promotes recovery for people with Enduring Mental Illness

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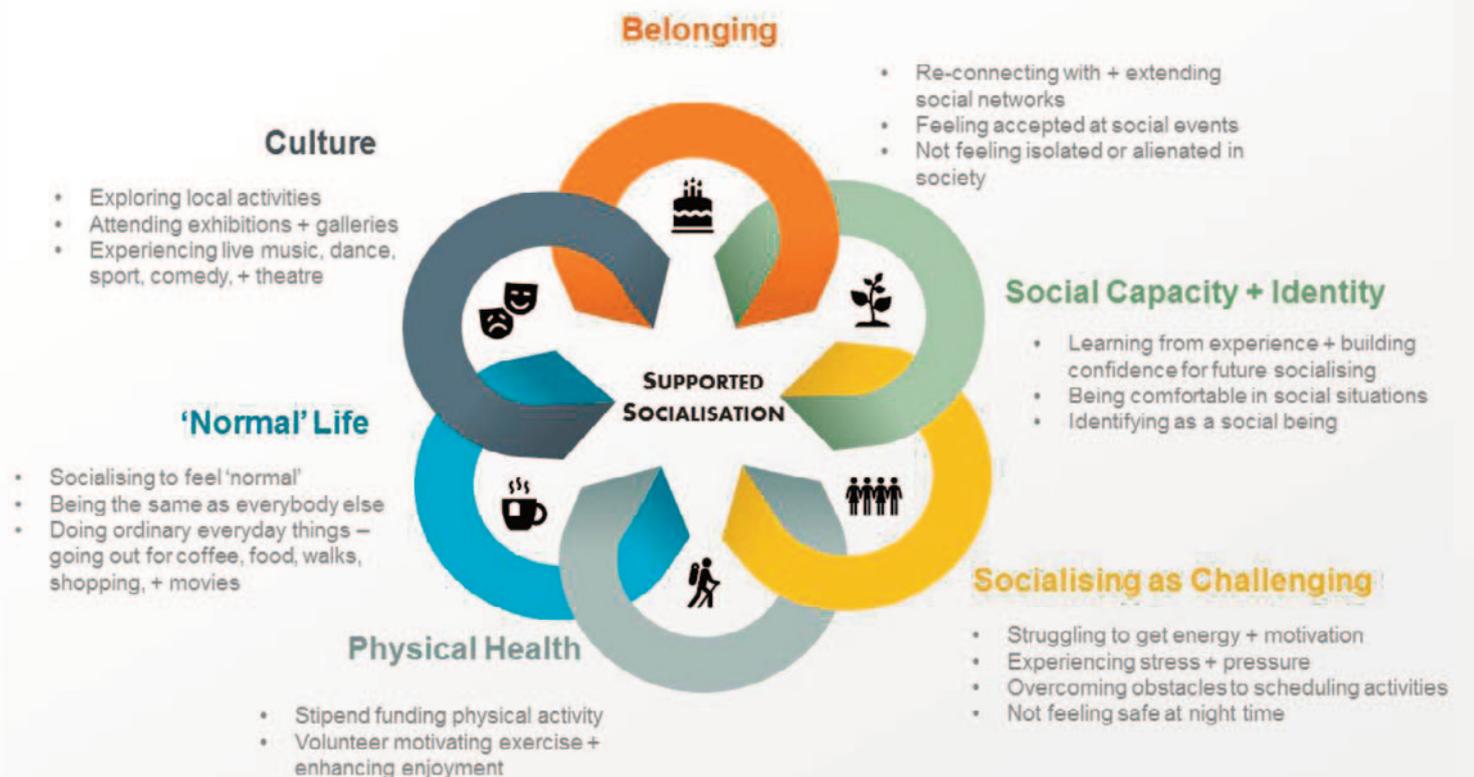


SUMMARY

This study impacted people with enduring mental illness (EMI), providing opportunities to participate in ordinary everyday activities and directly to the establishment of similar groups nationally. The research identified Supported Socialising is dependent upon more than a volunteer and that other factors including money contribute to improving social functioning and reducing loneliness.

The Minister for Mental Health and the CEO of Health Research Board launched the final report in 2012, garnering media reports nationally and internationally including radio interviews. The research was published in a prominent international publication – The International Journal of Social Psychiatry – and the knowledge generated informs education and practice of professionals and users of mental health services globally.

“Rather than immersion in the worlds created and managed by mental health services, community integration needs to be directed towards co-designing activities with people with experience of mental illness. This will facilitate service users to move towards independence, illness management and valued adult roles in their chosen community setting.”



RESEARCH

The study – a prospective Randomised Controlled Trial (RCT) – was undertaken within the Dublin/Mid-Leinster region from November 2007 to April 2012. A total of 107 people with EMI took part.

The team examined whether being supported to socialise leads to improved social functioning, self-esteem, and social networks; and reduced social isolation, loneliness and depression symptoms. People with a diagnosis of EMI attending one of five mental health services were invited to participate. Participation was over a 9-month period and involved (1) being matched with a volunteer partner, receiving a stipend of €20 per month and engaging in social/leisure activities together, or (2) receiving this stipend only and engaging in self-driven socialisation.

The intention was to promote a ‘friendship’ between a community volunteer and mental health service user comparable with ordinary social friendship outside the mental health care system. All participants completed written diaries documenting their perceptions on their experiences of supported socialisation.

The data was analysed by looking at changes in participants over time. They found that providing structured support—either community-based volunteer and/or monetary stipend—to socialise in the community had benefits for individuals with EMI.

Supported socialisation led to: an increase in recreational social functioning, confidence, social competence, and self-agency as well as a decrease in levels of social loneliness, in depression, and in the proportion of people living within a vulnerable social network. Our intervention was found to buffer against psychiatric stigma, build social capital, and afford opportunities to enhance social integration, inclusion, and belonging.

RESEARCH IMPACT

Health

Loneliness has profound physical and mental health consequences; increases the chances of physical health risk behaviours; and is a well-established mortality risk factor (Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010; Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015, Matthews et al., 2018). Positive outcomes were reported for both groups with loneliness (social, emotional, family and romantic), isolation, and depression decreasing significantly over time.

Study participants had less service contact, indicating that some service burden could be ameliorated by meeting social needs through Supported Socialisation. While these impacts were identified among our sample, publishing of our findings is likely to impact the health of people with EMI internationally if similar programmes are developed.

Academic, Scientific, & Training

Publications have been cited and our recent publication (Sheridan et al., 2018) has an Altmetric score of 63, in the top 5% of research outputs scored, and has had 50 downloads in the first month. Irish Medical Times also published a recent editorial on the study. Education, training, and practice of health/social care professionals and the knowledge of users of mental health services have been impacted internationally.

Policy

A direct result of our knowledge transfer, the Principal Investigator delivered an invited presentation to the HSE National Mental Health Policy group. The PI was then invited to take on an advisory role in the establishment of Supported Socialisation programmes by other community-based groups nationally.

The HSE supported this policy/practice initiative and provided funding to support the establishment and maintenance of programmes. One programme ‘Heading Out’, set up in Ballyfermot, continues to receive funding.

The final report was launched by the Minister for Mental Health and the CEO of the HRB. The PI was invited by GENIO and National Director for Mental Health to present results to national mental health leaders (Clinical, Management, Service Users, Carers and NGOs), promoting models for social inclusion and recovery from EMI.

Social & Cultural

The study has translated into raising awareness and addressing stigma associated with EMI. From the outset, the group recognized the potential to raise awareness of EMI and to address stigma associated with it through sharing information with potential volunteers and through education and training of the volunteers who would eventually participate.

They undertook widespread advertising and presented to large employers, parish/retirement groups, sporting organisations, patient/service user organisations, self-help/mental health advocacy groups, and through the Volunteering Ireland and Active Link websites.

This provided opportunities to openly challenge psychiatric stigma – in terms of recovery pessimism, the inaccurate association between mental illness and violence, and the assumption that people with EMI universally struggle in friendship, romantic relationships, parenthood, and employment.

They utilised broadcast e-mail to all staff and students in UCD following organisational and student union permission. The advertising campaign resulted in recruitment of almost 240 potential volunteers and a further 30 to engage in data collection. The group was also contacted by numerous people seeking information about services and/or supports either for themselves or a family member/friend. In this way, the study also acted to enhance mental health literacy within the community.

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At Report launch, Minister Kathleen Lynch with a service user participant and support volunteer, and Ann Sheridan (Principal Investigator)

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Publication

The International Journal of Social Psychiatry, March 14. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020764018763692>.

Media Reports

Supported Socialisation has huge mental health benefits', *Irish Medical Times*, 12th April 2018.

The research gained widespread coverage in the Irish media, including press and online – and gained traction in the international academic community, resulting in offers to collaborate from the University of Stockholm in Sweden and Yale University in the US.



Report Cover custom designed graphic representing social and leisure activities in the community