

Personal Outcomes Stories during COVID: Learning from practice

Your role and organisation: John McCormack, Consultant with the Scottish Violence Reduction Unit and Tutor on North Ayrshire Recovery College.

How have you been able to keep a focus on what matters to people during COVID?



My background in counselling means that putting what matters to people at the top of the agenda is drilled into me. This mindset was straightforward in the pre-pandemic world of face-to-face contact. Simply ask the group or individual what matters to them and what is their desired outcome or preferred future. Like so many others in the COVID era I am doing similar work but now online and the approach remains the same. Ask the group or individual directly and specifically, “what needs to happen to let you know it was a good thing we worked together?” or some of the other strengths based questions that enable the person to set the goals and the criteria for success on their terms.

What have you had to do differently and what made this possible?

Two projects that are underway have had to be handled differently both with surprisingly positive results. Firstly for the recovery college courses we planned how to deliver them online. We have a **designated moderator** who takes care of all the muting, and technical issues as well as setting up and managing breakout rooms. Prior to the pandemic I would have been sceptical about the possibility of doing effective therapeutic recovery focused group work without being in the same room together. However by having peer facilitators to support the process we can consider questions about our personal outcomes and hopes for recovery in the big group and then go to the breakout rooms to discuss in depth with all the usual protections of confidentiality in place.

The second project is a pilot designed to support the workforce of the north of Glasgow and the communities they serve. A 10 week “Help the Helpers” group work project with follow up 2.5 day Train the Trainers will be delivered to help create an up-skilled network of locally based mentors peers, and community leaders. One of the key skills we will be emphasising is how to help people (workers and community members) to articulate and name their desired outcomes and wishes. Then to offer strategies that help those people self manage and believe in themselves enough to take steps towards where they want to be. We have been using online technologies to have the preparatory meetings, the focus groups and to get people enthused about the project. Again in the pre-covid era it would not have occurred to us that thus could be achieved remotely. Furthermore the intention is to deliver the courses online too and make it easier for them to be rolled out nationally post evaluation.

What have you noticed that has been better? (for people using the service/staff/the organisation)

What has been better is accessibility in both cases. What this means is that in North Ayrshire people who would normally have difficulty getting public transport from remote rural areas can now access the course from the comfort of their front room. Also for people with disabilities the online experience has been positive and helpful.

For the VRU course gaining access to a range of locally based workers and community activists has been simplified obviating the need to get disparate stakeholders physically together in some neutral building.

How did this make you feel?

This has made me feel optimistic and hopeful. Online work will not replace human contact, but having it as an option in an overall approach to engagement has been the surprising upside of the pandemic. Such that we might consider it to be evidence of post-pandemic growth.

What have you learned through this?

I'd like to see further developments and even more creative thinking about how we deliver the best possible service to people. I've learned again that necessity is indeed the mother of invention. I've learned that I don't want to wait for the next global crisis before thinking to myself 'I wonder if we could do this differently?'