



Personal Outcomes Stories during COVID: Learning from practice

Your role and organisation: Keir McKechnie, Lived Experience Panel Co-ordinator, SAMH

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



I co-ordinate a panel of people from across Scotland with lived experience of loss through suicide. The panel has been created to inform Scotland's strategy for suicide prevention. It's about learning from the panel members and making recommendations about improving support and services. The work was still being established in the months leading up to COVID and we had already had our first two full day engagement events.

When we went into lockdown, the panel very quickly said that they wanted to continue the work. Indeed there is a new sense of purpose, given the anticipated mental health fallout from COVID. Given the emotive nature of our work, digital meetings had not been considered before. COVID required completely changing our approach to engagement.

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

Providing a safe environment is so important for this sensitive work. So the challenge for myself and for the Scottish Government and the delivery leads for the Suicide Prevention Action Plan is how do you do this kind of engagement online. We had to find a way that is safe while also genuinely gathering that experience. There was fear to start, partly because of my lack of tech skills but also fear about being able to genuinely engage, being able to make eye contact, reading non-verbal communication.

It would have been very easy for us to have closed down for the duration. But the first thing we did was decide we had to continue because there was a need for real time learning about how people were coping in this crisis. We started by asking the panel, did they want to continue, were they happy to do so online. Amazingly they all said that they did. In fact the work has taken on new urgency for them.

We have set up a structure which includes meetings with regular breaks and time out. There is the option to take an individual break at any time. We use break out rooms so people can still work in small groups. We have a session on safeguarding before every meeting where we remind ourselves of how the meetings will run. We ask our guests to

leave after their input so we can do a debrief. We also do a series of welfare calls to people. So that is all part of a new system and has required a lot of adaptation.

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

It's been surprising to me that this situation has helped the group bond in some ways. Given they are geographically distant, there were no opportunities to get together outwith our formal meetings before. So for example, we would never have had a Sunday night quiz before. People can chat during that and let their hair down.

We have also engaged with the SG around what they learned that could help people during COVID19. Could the panel make suggestions for coping techniques and safety techniques for moments of crisis. I've received an enthusiastic response to that request. I think the panel members feel that their input and experience is valued and their responsiveness has been noticed by the national delivery group.

How did this make you feel?

I feel a sense of achievement. I was worried the panel would fragment and we would lose momentum. I feel we are developing as a group, as evidenced by turnout and responses to surveys. We were challenged to adapt and collectively we have done that.

What have you learned through this?

So I've learned that it is possible to use the technology, to master it and to do it in a safe way. We do need to acknowledge the limitations too. We are supporting people who are sharing traumatic experiences. It is not a substitute for face to face engagement. But for now key learning is that it is possible to learn and share safely online.

I have also been aware that as well as checking in with panel members to make sure they are ok I also need to check in and talk about how I'm feeling, given the emotive nature of this work. It's not been that obvious who has that role but I'm leaning on people and I have been able to talk about how I handle disclosures and some of the more challenging aspects of the work.

Anything else you want to tell us?

I've been challenged by all of this too. I have had to put a lot of effort in to master the technology and develop ideas in a digital way. I have rewritten training sessions and new presentations. Aside from that, dealing with such an emotive subject in an online forum can be overwhelming. It's been worth it though, to keep the work going.