



Personal Outcomes Stories during COVID: Phase 2 understanding from experience

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What has continued to help keep a focus on what matters to people during the pandemic?

My main role with SAMH, which started back in September 2019, is facilitating the suicide prevention lived experience panel. The panel was set up to inform government policy and service improvement in suicide prevention. The pandemic itself has created a sense of urgency. Panel members have observed this and have expressed the need to continue the work around different aspects of suicide prevention work, like crisis support and post bereavement work. They want to be able to influence the response to mental health needs arising from the pandemic, by sharing their own experiences

Consistent and regular communication with the panel members has been essential. This has required being sensitive to the pressures people are under and the issues they are facing in their own lives. When we're involving key players and professionals involved in different aspects of the plan, we've had to think through how best to plan engagements online. One example of an engagement session involved considering groups at higher risk from suicide. A key issue has been how to enable people to share their lived experience. We listened to panel members who told us we needed to limit numbers attending engagement sessions so that people could share their experience sensitively and without being rushed. This was excellent advice and these sessions went very well.

We have also made sure that our partners who have been invited to come and speak share any background information or questions they have on the topic. This has worked very well as it allows panel members to properly consider the issues and their answers to any questions being posed. We also have pre-planning meetings before the speakers came to speak to the panel to make sure we made the best use of everyone's time.

Panel members have their own peer support group. They are free to discuss issues without me being there, but they can also contact my colleague and me at any time for an informal chat or email exchange.

The welfare check-ins take place at the end of each session to make sure everyone is ok. We need to be mindful that panel members have families and jobs and are personally affected by this Covid crisis. That influences the nature and pace of the work as we need to remain mindful not to bombard members with too many demands.

Are there changes that seem to be lasting longer term and are there things that have slid back to old ways of doing things?

We realise that digital engagement can be creative and can in some ways make it easier to involve people, especially for remote and rural populations. Panel members have developed short films, voice recordings, Instagram material and twitter threads which can then be edited by those with the know-how. We are using social media much more to share people's experiences and it is producing great results.

Panel members confirm they are missing the face to face engagement. However, digital and online are playing a vital role in continuing the work in ensuring that the national suicide prevention action programme continues. We look forward to engaging face to face again as soon as it is safe and possible to do so.

What difference has this made to people?

Panel members have expressed feeling valued and being taken seriously for their contributions. They can see the evidence of their voices being heard. In short, the Panel has been able to influence the direction and content of the National Suicide Prevention Action Plan. Through their engagement work the lived experience panel directly influenced the identity of the new United to Prevent Suicide campaign in Scotland. They were involved in producing TV ads that were watched by millions. Their stories were shared on STV and BBC and Radio Scotland as part of the campaign launch.

Behind the scenes, panel members have given their time to offer advice to help shape bereavement support services, to give a better understanding of at-risk groups & shared their views on developing models of crisis support to help people in suicidal crisis.

How did this make you feel?

I am relieved and really pleased that this vital work has been able to continue. I am so impressed by the commitment of the panel members in particular, but also with the wider range of stakeholders who have stuck with this programme and worked extremely hard to make sure the dots of different parts of the plan are joined together, with lived experience at the heart of it all.

Reflecting on your experiences what have you learned?

The key lesson is that to do this sensitively you have to seek the permission of people with lived experience every step of the way. We have learned that this needs to be negotiated and clarified with each partner involved in the project. For example, if someone is doing a TV interview or other media input we set up a meeting with the relevant agency, discuss the questions in advance and agree what is ok to share. That is at the heart of everything that we do.

What difference has it made to you to tell your story as part of this project?

A huge difference! The work of the Lived Experience Panel is a very good news story in very difficult and challenging circumstances. Being able to share the learning and read how other people have adapted to working during this pandemic has been invaluable. Personally, I have loved reading all of the stories in this project and the creative things that professionals are doing to keep delivering support and help to vulnerable people. The determination to go on has been inspiring!