

Music therapy group for people experiencing psychosis Catrin Pears-Banton, Music Therapist

This song was an unexpected outcome of a 20 week music therapy group for people who had experienced psychosis.

The group was formed from referrals to the Arts Therapies Department with the criteria that clients had experienced symptoms of psychosis. Everyday struggles with negative symptoms were also considered so that the provision of music therapy satisfied NICE Guidelines recommendations for Schizophrenia. Arts therapies, especially music therapy, are recommended as a useful treatment to manage the negative symptoms, such as depression, low motivation, and social isolation.

Two members of the group were diagnosed with Schizophrenia and have used mental health services for many years; the other two group members were referred by the Early Intervention In Psychosis Team having had both experienced one episode of psychosis. The group age range was from 20 – 40 years old and there was one female and three males clients.

The balance of experience in the group enabled a supportive dynamic to form fairly quickly. The more experienced users of services offered support to those new to mental health services through empathy and understanding of their raw and recent experiences. They shared their positive and negative stories of support received and their own recovery plans. The Early intervention group members seemed to pass on hope and a fresh energy to the others, sharing their drive for recovery and also sometimes a resistance to intervention.

Alongside weekly group improvisation and verbal reflection, the group collectively decided that a 'desired outcome' of their engagement in music therapy would be to have a product, a song that they had written together. Two of the group members had some musical knowledge and had basic piano and guitar skills, another group member used an old keyboard with some DJ-ing capabilities at his home. Each week we worked on putting together a song, starting with some topics that were important to the group and once the group decided on their 'inpatient experience' as a topic, they group came up with phrases, rhyming couplets, and important memories and words that illustrated something of this topic for them. As the music therapist I facilitated their thinking and reflection on their experiences and encouraged the musicians amongst them to come up with some musical structures on which to base the song. I provided something of the binding together of the lyric fragments and the chord progressions, but was careful to allow the song to mainly come from the collaboration of the group members.

As the song writing progressed over the weeks, group members decided they wanted the song to have a more positive focus, perhaps reflecting the music therapy process and the group members increasing trust and value in each other. The song evolved to become more about hope in their lives and moving forward. The process of writing the song enabled the group to reflect on the lyrics, their meaning, their personal experiences, coping strategies and considering what comes next, acknowledging all their experiences as important and enabling the group creativity to contribute towards group members feeling in control of their recovery process. When the song was complete, all group members were happy to use instruments to perform and record the song for themselves, yet no one was confident to sing on their own, they wanted me to sing and then have the choice to join in.

The group were very proud of their achievement of writing the song and wanted an opportunity to perform it. They seemed to leap on the chance to be part of a workshop raising awareness for the Early Intervention In Psychosis Team and agreed to attend, talk of their experiences of music therapy and perform their song. They also agreed wholeheartedly for the song to support promotion of using the arts therapies to manage symptoms and promote good mental health.