

Creative ways of working in mental health



Incorporating creativity into mental health practice can be therapeutic both for mental health service users and providers.

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Awalk along the traffic-clogged Walworth Road in the heart of south London is unlikely to feature in a glossy book portraying popular rambling trails in Britain's beauty spots. But, once a month, people who support or attend a local arts organisation take part in consciousness-raising walks along the Walworth Road and surrounding streets, often taking in artistic landmarks such as Tate Modern.

Largactyl Shuffle

Organised by CoolTan Arts, a Camberwell-based mental health and arts charity, the walks have the unlikely name of 'Largactyl Shuffle'. The title, explains development manager Susan McNally, was originally dreamt up by a participant (a term the charity prefers to 'service users') to highlight the unfortunate side effects of a widely used antipsychotic drug.¹

McNally describes Largactyl Shuffle as CoolTan's flagship event, noting that the aim is to "destigmatisate mental health issues, promote physical activity and introduce creativity, humour and history along the way."

Each walk has a special theme, such as the Summer Solstice Midnight Walk, which takes place on 18 June, while a special walk is held annually in October to celebrate World Mental Health Day.

The CoolTan way

Launched in 1990 in Brixton, CoolTan Arts' workshops were initially aimed at women who had experienced mental health problems, assault and trauma. Each week around 130 people of both genders currently attend classes run by professional artists covering topics such as batik, sculpture, drawing, video editing and filming.

One long-standing supporter of CoolTan's objectives is South London and Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust. A Trust spokesperson praised the 'fantastic work' undertaken by the charity, and said it played a crucial role in raising awareness and understanding of mental health issues.

Like many other mental health organisations, CoolTan Arts is having to rejig its plans after funding cuts kicked in last April. Operations director Jenny Irish said the development of the personalisation agenda meant participants could use their personal budgets to pay their fees to join therapeutic workshops in the future. Two hour courses can cost between £36 to £46 and services can be directly commissioned by outside providers with the organisation delivering quality services at competitive prices

"These cuts in funding are obviously proving challenging in the current economic climate when we are facing a rise in demand for our services from participants across London," Irish added.

The meaning of creativity

Tony Gillam, who qualified in mental health nursing in the 1980s, is convinced that creative activities can help to break down barriers between professionals and service users. But he has reservations about how the word 'creativity' is often used in today's NHS.

Gillam, clinical manager with the Worcestershire Early Intervention Service, explains: "The term 'creativity' is bandied about a lot in healthcare. Often it is used as a kind of shorthand for 'new ways of working' as if it is about efficiency and part of a rather reductionist way of managing resources.

But creativity in mental health is much more than that: it ought to be a breath of fresh air, something reinvigorating for both service users and service providers. There is a strong link between creativity and mental health and I believe by becoming aware of this link and reinforcing it we can improve mental health for all."

Creativity in practice

Is it getting harder for mental health professionals to be creative? Yes and no, according to Gil- lam. "There is a growing acknowledgment of the evidence-base for using creative arts in mental health. For example, the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence guidelines for schizophrenia emphasise the value of creative arts therapies.

"But the culture of healthcare has become increasingly bureaucratic and mechanistic in a way that doesn't promote creativity. While the rhetoric claims to encourage 'innovative ways of working', the reality of micro-management and increasingly defensive practice could stifle creativity.

"That said, creativity could be the antidote to this problem and I am keen to encourage truly creative approaches to mental health care. It should be remembered that this does not necessarily mean using creative arts but can be about just being more creative in our day to day interactions with service users, carers and colleagues."



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¹ Largactil (chlorpromazine) was invented in the 1950s to treat psychosis. A shuffling gait is associated with the drug. The misspelling of the drug in Largactyl Shuffle is deliberate.