

Mentoring service user researchers

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This article describes our experience of the role of a service user research mentor supporting less experienced service user researchers who were taking part in research in collaboration with a professional research team at Rethink Mental Illness.

Rethink Mental Illness has involved people who use mental health services in different ways on several research projects. For a 2008 study a team of service user researchers planned questions and prepared for interviews with guidance from an experienced service user researcher, Alison Faulkner. After the project, the service user researchers reflected that opportunities to get additional guidance and support from Alison at later stages in the project would have been valuable, and could have helped some participate more confidently.*

The research mentor role

In recognition of this recommendation Alison took on the role of mentor in two subsequent research projects. Her role was to provide independent support to the service user researchers. This was intended as a resource for them to call upon if they felt unable to take their concerns or queries direct to the researchers at Rethink Mental Illness, or if they wanted to explore any issues in confidence.

The research mentor's perspective

Alison was pleased to be asked to do this and already had good relationships with the team as they had worked together before.

Over the life of the project, Alison was called upon to provide different things for different people. The team varied in their skills and experience of research. A couple of the researchers were more than competent but lacked confidence in their research skills; they called Alison to talk through their worries and to get reassurance when they felt a bit 'wobbly'. One researcher struggled with the written aspects of the work at the analysis stage. Others went through significant periods of difficulty in their personal lives and called to talk this through. Alison thinks that the independence of her role helped with this, as people did not necessarily want to take these problems into the 'workplace'.

In addition, there were issues that arose in relation to the project itself. For example, there were long periods of inactivity early on when researchers felt frustrated by the lack of communication. Then, when interviews began to be arranged, it was sometimes at short notice and often unpredictable. Towards the end of the project the work increased and deadlines became more pressing. This led to one or two people needing to talk through strategies for managing this.

Alison enjoyed the sense of warmth in her relationships with all of the team members and felt that people used her appropriately. If anything she felt they could have called upon her more often, which led her to wonder if she should have been more proactive in making contact. At times she felt frustrated by her lack of involvement in the research project and found the role a little difficult to manage in relation to her other work as it was unpredictable.

Views of the service user researchers

The researchers valued the opportunity to have someone to talk to outside of the research team. They found it very useful to have a mentor who had her own lived experience of mental

health problems, as well as having expertise in research. One person described this as a form of peer support, with Alison being able to understand the dilemmas that may arise from these roles and experiences. Having someone with good listening skills, who was also independent of the research team at Rethink Mental Illness, was especially valuable.

“You have been of enormous help to me. There were a couple of days when I had no idea how I would have got to the end of the day without having you to talk with... [the support was] far greater/better than I could have imagined.”

“I was feeling really pressurised and that I would have to give up the project, but talking it over with Alison enabled me to see there was a way to bring the things that were causing me problems out and discuss them.

Having her support helped me find a way forward, instead of running away. That’s helped me feel more confident in other situations too.”

“I can say things without censoring myself – I don’t have to worry about what I’m saying.”

A couple of the researchers wished that Alison had been more involved in the project, particularly at the analysis stage.

Perspectives of the Rethink Mental Illness research team

The mentor role was intended to be external to the actual research, and to be there as a resource to support and empower the service users in their role as researchers. So, for example, when Alison became involved in supporting analysis, it was with the aim of assisting the researchers to articulate their own insights and understandings.

The research team reflected that the need for this role may have been partly related to the working arrangements for the service user researchers. They were employed as ‘bank workers’

and paid an hourly rate. Although staff in the project team provided support and had regular conversations and debriefings with service user researchers, there were no formal supervision structures in place. The research team felt that regular individual supervision could perhaps have covered some of the support provided by Alison's role.

One of the research projects was conducted under tight time and budget pressures. In managing the project, the lead researcher needed to constantly balance the needs of the project with the needs of the service user researchers. As a result, when these needs were in tension, it was difficult for the research manager to provide the support needed. The team felt that Alison's fresh and independent perspective was hugely helpful in these circumstances. It meant that the service user researchers had someone who was there just for them, without responsibilities to the wider project delivery, which released pressure on the lead researcher of having to be all things to all people.

Conclusions

In these projects, the mentor role provided benefits for the service user researchers, the whole team and the project outcomes. It enabled service user researchers to have stronger voices in the research team, allowing all to work together more effectively. This was supportive of the collaborative approach of the research studies.

It is hoped that other research teams working with service user researchers may find inspiration in this model and consider working with an independent mentor.

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*See page 31 in Bowyer et al. (2010) Recovery insights: Learning from lived

experience, London: Rethink.
from: www.rethink.org/recoveryinsights

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