Making conversations about mental health easier: The role of communication partners according to people with communication access needs

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Short Abstract

Everyday communication partners (ECPs), such as family members, friends and support workers, play an important role in the mental health help-seeking experiences of people with communication access needs (Watson et al., 2021). They are often the first point of contact when emotional distress presents. As such, ECPs' responses can determine the course of mental health support and access to specialist mental health care. In this presentation we will outline the communication partner characteristics and behaviours highlighted by people with communication access needs as being beneficial to addressing matters related to mental health and wellbeing.

This participatory-social justice mixed methods study underpinned by The Human Rights Model (Degener, 2016) explored access to mental health care for people with communication access needs. People with communication access needs participated in surveys (n=9) and interviews (n=6) that asked about their experiences of getting help for mental health. The information that they provided was analysed using the Framework Approach (Ritchie et al., 2014).

People with communication access needs told us that ECPs who are good at supporting mental health had certain qualities and behaviours that made difficult conversations easier. For example, these ECPs offered opportunities and allowed adequate time for communication about mental health, knew the person well, and helping them resolve stressful problems. People with communication access needs gave a valuable perspective on the ECP characteristics and behaviours that promote discussion about wellbeing and access to mental health care. Understanding these perspectives may improve the effectiveness of mental health care.

Long Abstract

Everyday communication partners (ECPs), such as family members, friends and support workers, play an important role in the mental health help-seeking experiences of people with communication access needs (Watson et al., 2021). They are often the first point of contact when emotional distress presents. As such, ECPs' responses can determine the course of mental health support and access to specialist mental health care. In this presentation we will outline the communication partner characteristics and behaviours highlighted by people with

communication access needs as being valuable when addressing matters related to mental health and wellbeing.

Method. The Human Rights Model (Degener, 2016) was used to inform the design of a participatory-social justice mixed methods study exploring access to mental health care for people with communication access needs. Online surveys and interviews were designed in collaboration with lived-experience research advisors and delivered to three groups: people with communication access needs (n=9 survey, n=6 interview), their ECPs (n=9 survey, n=6 interview), and MHWs (n=24 survey, n=9 interview). Framework Analysis (Ritchie et al., 2014) was used to analyse the interviews and survey data was analysed using descriptive statistics. Quantitative and qualitative data were integrated using the Framework approach. In this presentation we focus on information provided by people with communication access needs.

Findings. Survey results produced information about communication partner behaviours that promote dialogue about mental health and emotional wellbeing. Interview data provided further insight into communication access strategies and their implications when used by ECPs and MHWs. Survey respondents with communication access needs indicated that they were most likely to share their feelings, concerns, and emotions with a family member (n=7) or support worker (n=7), followed by friends (n=4), colleagues or peers (n=3). A third of survey respondents indicated that they shared their emotions, concerns, or feelings with a professional (non-mental health) (n=3) or MHW (n=3).

Interviewees explored the influence of ECP factors on access to mental health care.

Interviewees indicated that ECPs required knowledge of the person, their communication methods, and mental health literacy to facilitate connections to mental health care. In this presentation, the roles of ECPs in offering effective support for emotional wellbeing and developing connections with mental health services will be explored. Some specific communication strategies to assist discussions included: providing adequate time, access to reliable AAC and vocabulary, using relevant and customised mental health resources, and incorporating communication access strategies into mental health care.

Conclusion. This study highlights the important roles played by ECPs in aiding the mental health and wellbeing of people with communication access needs, as sources of information, providers of emotional support, conveying beneficial attitudes towards mental health, and as channels to mental health care. People with communication access needs present a unique and valuable perspective on the ECP characteristics and behaviours that promote discussion about wellbeing and access to mental health care. Understanding these perspectives can improve the effectiveness of mental health care.

References

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