

THE ALCHEMY PROJECT

SYNOPSIS

Dance as part of an integrated recovery model in Early Intervention in Psychosis



Photos by Pari Naderi

BACKGROUND

In October 2013 a radical, intensive, dance-led project was piloted within Early Intervention in Psychosis; it delivered very promising results for the participants and indicated that there were significant potential benefits for service users and also the service itself.

Entitled *SeaBreeze*, the project was delivered by Dance United in partnership with the Institute of Psychiatry at King's College, South London and Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust (SLaM). It was funded by Maudsley Charity, Guy's and St Thomas' Charity and Arts Council England and benefitted from support from Bipolar UK and Rethink Mental Illness.

A group of 16 young adults and 6 peer mentors took part in the *SeaBreeze* pilot; it ran over the course of 4 weeks and culminated in participants showing a dance performance of a professional standard to an invited audience. The performance was a moment for family and friends to witness the participants' extraordinary achievements and to see them in an entirely new light; moreover, the preconceptions of mental health professionals regarding what this client group could achieve were also challenged.

Encouragingly, over the course of the pilot, the participating group moved from below average wellbeing to normal wellbeing levels i.e. above average for this population. Participants started the project in the mid-forties on the WEMWBS¹ scale and at completion had increased by a clinically significant 10 points to 53.9. Furthermore, Care Coordinators noted the very high levels of attendance, particularly given the full-time nature of the commitment and the levels of engagement it demanded.

Dr Matthew Taylor, Institute of Psychiatry

"There are so many other clients to whom I would like to offer this project, so many people with whom we are "stuck" that we don't quite know what will help them take that next step towards recovery. Too often I feel we go down the more coercive routes when this happens, rather than seeing if projects like [The Alchemy Project] could make a difference"

Ann Bessell, (Social Worker STEP Southwark Team for Early Intervention in Psychosis)

¹ The Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale

A CO-PRODUCED ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT IN 2015

The Alchemy Project (TAP) was set up by dance and performance production company CUE in association with Dance United Yorkshire, in January 2015 to take forward the outcomes of the *SeaBreeze* pilot and is currently delivering a year-long Action Research project. The Action Research, funded by Guys and St Thomas' Charity and Maudsley Charity and co-produced with SLaM Early Intervention in Psychosis Service, will

- a. test that the outcomes of two further dance-led interventions - deploying the same methodology as *SeaBreeze* - are consistent with the first outcomes
- b. deliver a robust *in situ* independent evaluation of both service impact and value for money² to establish the case for the intervention to be developed for local commission-ability

The dance-led interventions, each with a different group of participants referred from Early Intervention in Psychosis Services through SLaM, are embedded as a contribution to existing frontline provision. They aim to support young adults in their recovery and are offered as a way of extending the vocational offer of the Early Intervention in Psychosis Service.

The first intervention was successfully delivered in **March/April 2015** with 18 young adults and peer mentors recruited. The second intervention takes place in **June/July 2015**; it has recruited the maximum number of participants and concludes with a performance on 20 July 2015 at Lilian Baylis Studio, Sadler's Wells, London. Alongside the delivery of the interventions a film is being produced to capture the nature of the process, to reveal the impact on participants and to give insights into how it achieves its outcomes.

Over the course of the 4week project, participants learn contemporary dance technique, and then rehearse and perform an original dance piece (El Camino – specially choreographed by Darren Ellis) that showcases all that they have achieved to an invited audience of family and friends and health professionals. They also engage in trust-building and team-building exercises, share healthy lunches and work as a dance company for the duration of the project; all of which enables them to develop a strong sense of community. The teaching methodology and ethos are rooted in engaging and inspiring people who are struggling in their lives; they are innovative, holistic and focus on wellbeing rather than deficits.

A Vocational Support Worker (Jide Ashimi from LEO team) is embedded within the delivery team to provide specialist support. Post Intervention work with the Early Intervention in Psychosis teams creates the final part of the process; this is designed to capture the motivation, commitment and sense of mastery that each individual has achieved and to identify and inspire onward pathways.

SUMMARY of KEY POINTS

- The Alchemy Project offers a **radical dance-led intervention** model that provides transformational opportunities **for Young Adults accessing Early Intervention in Psychosis Services**
- The dance intervention has to date **delivered clinically significant results** in the wellbeing of participants, **specifically a 10 point increase in their WEMBS scores**
- The intervention **acts as powerful catalyst for the recovery** of mental health service users. **Key factors** in the effectiveness of the intervention are
 - It does not define participants by their illness or their deficits and instead provides a **focus, structure and process** that enables them **to work beyond the typical lived experience of this constituency** and challenge their expectations of themselves
 - The physical activity of dancing **addresses symptoms of mental health illness and/or medication such as apathy, lethargy and lack of motivation** and rebalances the mind-body relationship.

² Optimity Matrix as the Independent Evaluation Consultancy engaged

- It creates social and physical connections between individuals and **counteracts the feelings of isolation and fragmentation** characteristic of populations with mental health problems.
- The intervention **impacts positively on the Early Intervention Service** itself
 - The intensity of the intervention i.e. that it looks after clients for a period of 4 weeks **relieves workload pressure for Care Coordinators**
 - It **raises the bar** in regard to Care Coordinator's (and Clinician's) **expectations of their clients/service users**
 - **Care Coordinators** who have participated in training or in sessions themselves note it as a **powerful contributor to their own mental wellbeing** and a positive experience in their own development.

CONCLUSION

As at June 2015 with the second of the two Action Research Interventions underway the project is over-subscribed and there is a waiting list of referred service users, a fact that stands testament to the demand for the intervention from within the service and which is complemented by the endorsement of Clinicians.

"I shall continue to act as an advocate/ambassador for this project. To move to a more embodied treatment model of mental illness in my view is important and I hope that services will consider incorporating such projects into mental health services routinely."

Dr Lauren Gavaghan (ST5 Psychiatrist South London & Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust)

Beyond the service there is a ground swell of support for the model from major mental health bodies such as Rethink Mental Illness and the Mental Health Foundation. The priority now is on breaking down barriers to adoption and supporting those who can champion the work with a robust evidence base and tools to demonstrate its effectiveness.

The Alchemy Project is an enterprise established by Dance United Yorkshire (DUY) in association with Cultural Utilities and Enterprises (CUE) to take forward the work that Dance United had been developing in the mental health sector.

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