

**Best practice in engaging people with a mental illness: Developing educational resources for students and outreach clinicians**

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**Introduction:** It is widely accepted that a clinician's ability to engage consumers with a mental illness has a significant influence on treatment outcomes (Chinman, Allende, Bailey, Maust, & Davidson, 1999). However, the term engagement is not clearly defined, the usefulness of therapeutic engagement is not plainly understood, and there are few resources for enabling engagement in practice.

**Objectives:** The aim of this project was to identify best practice in engagement of people with severe and enduring mental illness who are difficult to engage, and produce evidence-based resources in order to improve skill development of outreach clinicians, students, and registrars. Engagement was defined as the first phase of establishing connections between a consumer, their environmental supports, and a clinician or service to build the foundations of a therapeutic relationship.

**Description:** A project advisory team involving clinicians from an Australian urban mental health service and two occupational therapy (OT) students guided the project. Qualitative data concerning engagement issues in practice, previously collected from local AOTs, was thematically analysed. Frequently occurring themes concerning engagement practice from the literature and qualitative analysis were shared with AOT clinicians to establish their authenticity. Stakeholders including an AOT, quality manager, and carer and consumer consultants were consulted during the project to provide content advice, feedback, and resource recommendations.

**Results:** Best-practice engagement was found to be a complex skill involving three overarching themes: 'connecting with'; 'looking after yourself and others'; and 'building alliances'. Resources developed to build engagement skills included summaries of practical considerations and key themes, an interactive PowerPoint document, and an in-depth resource including references and triggers for reflective practice.

**Conclusion:** Engagement is a fundamental clinical skill that can be better understood and developed using interactive resources incorporating the evidence and practice wisdom.

**Contribution to OT practice:** The resources provide a variety of tools for OT students and clinicians working in mental health services to use in the development of engagement skills and reflective practice.

**Reference**

Chinman, M., Allende, M., Bailey, P., Maust, J., & Davidson, L. (1999). Therapeutic agents of assertive community treatment. *Psychiatric Quarterly*, 70(2), 137-161.