

How do we include the socially excluded and isolated?

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Social exclusion occurs for people of various groups in countries throughout the world. One group of people who are often excluded in a variety of ways is those with mental illnesses. This exclusion by society is compounded when the very nature of the mental illness may interfere with social skills and in an attempt to compensate the person begins to isolate him/herself from others. This combination of exclusion and isolation further the occupational dysfunction of the individual. This is especially true if the person has schizophrenia with negative symptoms.

Within mental health young males are particularly difficult to reach and attract to services. They typically attend formal mental health services only a third as often as young females. Yet in many countries they are between three and four times more likely to commit suicide and almost three times more likely to develop schizophrenia.

In this paper we present a novel way of interacting with young males. Previous research had already developed a tennis group where young males attended on a weekly basis. While the tennis group was not exclusively for young males they were the dominant members, more than 90%. The current research used the tennis group as a point of contact to develop a Facebook page to co-ordinate an online group. The online group was used to steer the current research into young males and how they could be reached and attracted to mental health services using technology. In itself this was a learning experience that sometimes real world contact needs to precede technologically enhanced contact.

The combination of the two occupations, playing tennis and using Facebook, allowed for both online and real world interactions. The Facebook group also had some people who were not engaging in the tennis group as members. Yet both playing tennis and interacting on Facebook meant that the participants of the research project were interacting with other young males who had an interest in mental health.

We propose that using multiple occupational pathways to reach isolated and socially excluded people is both beneficial and productive.