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The value of group therapy: towards increased service user involvement in private mental health practice in South Africa

Mia Vermaak
Department of Occupational Therapy, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, Free State, South Africa

Introduction: Service user involvement, as an active collaboration between service users and the multi-disciplinary team as service provider, remains limited in private mental health services in South Africa. Problems are increasingly experienced with limited funding provided for group therapy in mental health practice, specifically affecting occupational therapy service providers in private practice. On a service level, the voices of service users may be heard by the service provider in the form of evaluations and informal feedback. However, the availability of service user perspectives, to report on a systems level to policy-makers and funders, is limited.

Objectives: The aim of this study was to describe the value of the multi-disciplinary psycho-social group therapy program at a private clinic, from the service users' perspective.

Method: A descriptive, qualitative approach was followed, by making use of the nominal group technique in four sessions, and 1500 reflective questionnaires completed after usual group therapy sessions. Content analysis was done to identify themes.

Findings: Findings describe how service users articulated their opinions about group therapy; and indicated that they value both the content and the process of group therapy. The value of competent group facilitators is also underscored throughout all findings.

Conclusion: The perceived value of group therapy for service users need to be communicated to funders, to inform their decision-making regarding the funding of group therapy in inpatient services. Further research, specifically in-depth program evaluation, may be needed to facilitate power sharing between all stakeholders: the service providers (including occupational therapists), funders, and service users.