



SDC Project Spotlight:

scottishdevelopmentcentre
for mental health

Making the arts accessible for people with mental health problems

About the research

SDC's previous research shows that attendance of and participation in the arts is enjoyed by a sizable proportion of the Scottish population, and is an activity that is widely perceived to have multiple wellbeing benefits. Despite this, those with poor mental wellbeing are less likely to have recently attended arts events or participated in arts activities. In order to make progress in this area, SDC felt it would be valuable to consult with people who have lived experience of mental health problems, with a view to working with arts venues to implement any practical recommendations. SDC prepared a web survey about arts accessibility which was distributed for completion by people with lived experience of mental health problems. The survey was available online in May and June 2010, and was distributed widely via SDC networks. In total, 125 people who currently experience mental health problems, and 150 people who previously experienced mental health problems responded. Six focus groups were conducted during June and July 2010 with people who had some interest in making the arts accessible to people with mental health problems. Participants in the groups consisted of people with lived experience of mental health problems (current or previous) and people who were close to someone with experience of mental health problems, living in the Lothians. SDC additionally conducted tele-depth interviews with two people who were unavailable to attend the focus groups but who wished to participate. In total, 35 people participated in the focus groups and depth interviews.

Key findings

According to the survey, those with current experience of mental health problems were less frequent attenders of the arts than those who previously experienced mental health problems. Of those with current experience of mental health problems, 40% agreed that 'Having a mental health problem stops me from going to arts events'.

In the focus groups, many people with mental health problems reported the positive wellbeing impacts of arts attendance, including enjoyment, feelings of creativity, and escapism. People with mental health problems often use the arts to enhance and maintain their recovery. Many people with mental health problems spoke passionately about their love for experiencing high quality arts and expressed a strong desire to experience challenging and stimulating works. For many, the experience of having a mental health problem can be a barrier to participating in society and doing the things they would like to do and this can make attending arts events particularly challenging.

Barriers to arts attendance include:

- Fluctuations in symptoms or low mood on the day of an event;
- Perceptions of arts venues as being intimidating and elitist;
- Difficulties with transport to and from the venue;
- Worries about needing to leave an event before it has ended;
- Concerns about potentially upsetting content;
- Affordability restrictions on the number of events that can be attended, the types of tickets that can be bought, and the 'optional extras' that can be purchased;
- Worries about being stigmatised when attempting to purchase concession tickets or asking for assistance;
- Worries about 'looking wrong' (behaviour or style of dress);
- Worries that staff or other attenders may be unwelcoming or judgemental;
- Worries about feeling uncomfortable in a crowd of people, or sitting in close proximity to strangers.

Enablers to arts attendance include:

- Knowledge of cheap or free arts events;
- Attending in a group or with a friend or carer;
- Easily accessible concession prices for people with mental health problems, and their carers;
- Returns policies allowing refund or exchange if an individual is unwell on the day of an event;
- Having access to information about venues in advance;
- Access to events which finish early or are likely to be less busy;
- The availability of rating systems and content warnings for events;
- The provision of information about the length of performance, planned intervals and end times;
- Selecting an accessible seat in advance;
- Welcoming and non-judgemental venue staff;
- The availability of a quiet space in the venue.

Whilst there are clear parallels between those with mental health problems and many first time or non-attenders, our research suggests that the nature of having a mental health problem can pose enhanced and complex barriers to attendance, and negative experiences can have long lasting consequences. It is possible to experience a broad spectrum of mental health problems, and these barriers do not apply equally to everyone with lived experience of mental health problems and some experience no barriers at all.

Conclusions

All members of society have a cultural entitlement to attend high quality arts events, and people with mental health problems should not be exempt from this. Many of the barriers to attendance can be overcome by ensuring that people with mental health problems are empowered to make an informed choice about whether to attend an arts event or not. Providing adequate information about productions, venues and pricing can help to dispel any worries that an individual might have in advance of booking or attendance. Upon attendance, mental health awareness amongst customer service staff is integral to ensuring that people with mental health problems have a positive experience when attending an arts event or venue.

Although substantial good practice may be in place already, its availability may not be known to people with mental health problems, and therefore it would be helpful to ensure that communications are designed with clarity and appropriately directed to service user groups in order to ensure that people with mental health problems can make an informed decision to attend an arts event. Combined, these measures can help an individual with mental health problems to take the first step to booking tickets for an arts event which could have a positive impact on their wellbeing and recovery from mental health problems.

A full report is available on request.

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