

Dr Ben Gray, academic and voice hearer has drafted a petition an open letter entitled 'Listening to Experience: Opening Up Democratic Partnerships in Mental Health', this initiative is intended to draw attention to the need to place the person with mental health problems and their experiences at the forefront of mental health care, ensure their human and medical rights and consider new and innovative methods for coping more insightfully with mental health problems.

If you would like to help with the drafting process or express your support contact us at admin@intervoiceonline.org

Listening to Experience: Opening Up Democratic Partnerships in Mental Health.

Having a mental health problem is a difficult and frightening experience. To complicate matters, people with mental health problems often experience discrimination, stigma and social exclusion, both by other people in society who do not understand mental illness and by professionals, such as psychiatrists, nurses and social workers, who require more patient-centred and appropriate training and education on key issues in mental health.

There is a reliance within mental health on the prescription of powerful antipsychotic and pharmaceutical medication, with little recourse to alternative and less invasive treatments. In some circumstances, medication can be forcibly administered to people with mental health problems against their wishes and consent.

More recently there has been a growth in research and psychiatric understanding, outlining alternative methods for coping with mental health problems, such as hearing voices. In this alternative and modern approach, symptoms such as hearing voices are discussed and related to peoples' experiences, rather than discounted as delusions and falsehoods. The voice hearing experience is accepted so as to be listened to and discussed in relation to peoples' histories and personal stories.

It is imperative that we take account of the experiences of people with mental health problems, so as to provide more patient-centred, humane, holistic, collaborative and human-rights based mental health care.

There are five chief recommendations in order to begin such a collaborative and listening process:

1. Alternative approaches to mental illness should be thoroughly covered in mental health training and education by professionals such as psychiatrists, nurses and social workers. The work of Romme and Escher and others involved in the hearing voices movement outlines such alternative and effective approaches to conventional interventions.
2. In order for professionals to engage, empathise and effectively collaborate with people with mental health problems in their practice there should be training and education programmes available to professionals that are run by people who have

- experienced mental health problems. Experience is often said to be the greatest teacher. Experience is expertise. Listening to the experiences of people with mental health problems will provide professionals from the health, social care and voluntary sectors with a broader and more empathetic perspective as well as opening up the pathway to more holistic and democratic care.
3. The use of advance agreements or advance directives with people who have mental health problems should be encouraged, so as to open up more democratic pathways of treatment and care in collaboration with mental health teams and consultant psychiatrists. The use of advance agreements enables the person with mental health issues, when they are stable and well, to stipulate their preferred method of treatment at a future date when considered unwell or mentally ill.
 4. To ensure full collaboration as well as consistent and humane care a person who has experienced mental health problems should be appointed to all Mental Health Tribunals. This will ensure that the person with mental health problems is better represented legally and ethically by a peer.
 5. A review of the efficacy, debilitating side-effects and alternatives to medical treatment should be conducted in order to begin to assess new and less invasive methods of helping people to cope more insightfully with mental illness.

The key aim is to place the person with mental health problems and their experiences at the forefront and centre of mental health care, ensure their human and medical rights, give them a democratic say in their care and consider new and innovative methods for coping more insightfully with mental illness.