Community theatre project explores smoking addiction with people living with mental illness

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW
Smoking rates are much higher among people living with mental health issues compared to the rest of the population. To understand why, the researchers worked with clients and care providers in a psychiatric day hospital to create a play. By creating, performing, and discussing the play with the audience of health care providers, participants were able to share and reflect upon their experiences and reduce stigma around mental illness and addiction.

WHAT IS THIS RESEARCH ABOUT?
Studying artistic processes, such as the creation and performance of theatre, is a field known as arts-based research (ABR). The research is led by participants as they create an artistic product by reflecting upon their lived experiences. ABR can provide an opportunity for the participants and the researcher to present multiple perspectives, gain a deeper understanding of the issue itself, challenge the status-quo, and enact social justice.

This research project was led by people living with mental health issues who were part of a smoking cessation group. There are significantly higher rates of smoking among people with mental health issues than the general population. Through a collaborative theatre project, participants learned about how the tobacco industry has targeted people living with mental health issues and influenced the health care system, and shared their own personal stories and experiences with smoking. The theatre project included the performance of a play and post-play discussions for the audience who were people living with mental illnesses, their family members and friends, and health care providers.

Credit: UVic Photo Services
WHAT DID THE RESEARCHERS DO?
The researchers collaborated with clients in a psychiatric day hospital, who disclosed living with schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, or major clinical depression and were between 20-60 years old. Together, they created and performed a play about the connections between the tobacco industry, smoking, and mental health. The play drew on personal experiences from the actors (clients of the hospital) and previous research and documents on smoking and the tobacco industry. The researchers used information collected from the creation of the play and discussions with participants after the performances.

WHAT DID THE RESEARCHERS FIND?
The researchers found that participants (actors and mental health professionals) became full collaborators in the research. In particular the project led to:

• stronger community support and relationships
  o further support for a mental health and addictions support group for the participants
  o deeper relationships among the participants, the healthcare professionals, and the researchers
• improved relationships with healthcare professionals
  o representation of people living with mental illnesses in the play challenged stereotypes
  o actors’ and crew members’ perspectives on their own addictions humanized them for healthcare professionals
• greater confidence and self-awareness among participants
  o some participants reflected upon their addictions and stopped using some addictive substances
  o increased self-confidence from the inclusion of their personal experience in the play

HOW CAN YOU USE THIS RESEARCH?
There are many ways to learn about and empathize with people in all walks of life. Artistic representations, such as music, visual arts, dance, or theatre can help you understand and relate to the experiences of others. What are some of the misconceptions you might carry with you, and how might engaging in art help you come to new conclusions?

ABOUT THE RESEARCHERS
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Theatre, smoking, mental health, addiction, arts-based research

CITATION

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