

Personal stories of mental illness can help others on the road to recovery

May 6 2019, by Emma Thorne



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Inspirational stories of how people have overcome their struggles with mental illness can help others on the road to recovery, a study by researchers at The University of Nottingham has found.

However, first-hand accounts that include specific details of harmful behaviour may have a [negative impact](#) on some groups, including those battling an eating disorder.

A review of the existing evidence, recently published in the journal *Canadian Journal of Psychiatry*, will help to shed light on whether stories from those who have recovered could be used as a resource in clinical practice and treatments for people experiencing [mental health problems](#).

Dr. Stefan Rennick-Egglestone in the University's School of Health Sciences and Institute of Mental Health led the review, as part of the NEON study, led by Professor Mike Slade.

Stefan said: "We wondered whether stories of [recovery](#) might help people who find it difficult to access other forms of mental [health](#) treatment, such as people living in rural locations or experiencing [social anxiety](#), and we found that they can, as long as possible negative impacts are managed carefully"

The research aimed to look at the impact of these stories on others with mental health problems—specifically how connected it made them feel to a wider community, how it helped their understanding of recovery, how it reduced stigma around mental illness and how they responded to these stories.

First-person experiences of [mental illness](#) are widely available online and in books and have been used in various high-profile mental health campaigns aimed at reducing stigma and encouraging people to seek help.

The Bell Let's Talk campaign in the US has used personal video and text stories through its website to help promote social contact between people

with mental health problems and to reduce stigma around the issue.

Other organisations such as Here to Help and the Scottish Recovery Network have created online collections of personal journeys with the explicit intent of supporting others who are experiencing similar difficulties.

These methods are also seen as an effective way of incorporating information and communication technologies into mental health practice and as a way of overcoming challenges around limited access to mental health services in rural and minority communities.

The study searched through more than 8,000 articles to find five previous research papers on the topic.

These resources were analysed by the team of specialist mental health researchers for their impact on others with mental health problems and were also assessed by a 'Lived Experience Advisory Panel' made up of 10 people with previous experience of mental health problems and recovery.

The team concluded that these personal stories could be helpful for professionals supporting people with mental health with their own recovery and could be particularly beneficial for those who don't have access to a fact-to-face network of peers.

Online materials were also useful for tackling social isolation experienced by those living in rural or remote locations, but the researchers sounded a note of caution, highlighting that support was needed to help with the processing of the strong emotions that can arise as a result of viewing these materials.

But the research did highlight potentially negative issues related to

groups of people with specific mental health [problems](#), where online material may trigger instances of self-harm.

In particular, they found this was a risk among people with an eating disorder where a personal [story](#) included details of harmful behaviours engaged in by the narrator, for example dangerously low daily calorie counts or specific patterns of disordered eating.

More information: Stefan Rennick-Egglestone et al. Mental Health Recovery Narratives and Their Impact on Recipients: Systematic Review and Narrative Synthesis, *The Canadian Journal of Psychiatry* (2019).

[DOI: 10.1177/0706743719846108](https://doi.org/10.1177/0706743719846108)

Provided by University of Nottingham

Citation: Personal stories of mental illness can help others on the road to recovery (2019, May 6) retrieved 26 April 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2019-05-personal-stories-mental-illness-road.html>

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