Participatory Design of evidence-based online youth mental health promotion, intervention and treatment

One of the key challenges for radically improving young people’s mental health is how to research, design and develop interventions that are not only evidence-based but engaging for young people.

Participatory Design is a philosophical and practical approach to design that provides tools and techniques to involve all stakeholders in the design process. It goes beyond consultation and testing of ideas, bringing together researchers, designers, users and other experts in activities to understand and define the ‘problem’ and the context in which it exists, develop strategies and concepts and to build, trial and evaluate the interventions that emerge from this process.

WHY PARTICIPATORY DESIGN?

Mental health and public health research, theories, models and logics help us to understand where the problems are, who the target audience is and what the benefits of the project or intervention need to be. They also provide tools and steps that young people need to take in order to achieve positive mental health outcomes.

A participatory approach provides methods for understanding how young people perceive these issues and how messages and tools need to be framed and delivered in order for them to be engaging, meaningful, relevant and used by young people. A participatory approach also provides methods for enabling those young people to actively participate in the design process. Working with young people when a project commences can lead to the creation of a new understanding or new definition of the ‘problem’ in ways not possible without their involvement.

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CHALLENGES

- How can the evidence base and public and mental health intervention planning models be integrated with user experience?
- What methods and artefacts best support youth involvement in the context of mental health research?
- What principles, practices and ethical considerations support participatory design with young people?

ABOUT THE GUIDE

To meet these challenges, Dr Penny Hagen, in collaboration with the Inspire Foundation and the Young and Well CRC has developed a framework and guide: Participatory Design of evidence-based online youth mental health promotion, intervention and treatment. The guide is based on a review of the Participatory Design literature and past Inspire Foundation projects. It is intended that the methods and approaches proposed in the guide can be applied regardless of research approach, technology platform or software development methodology.

The guide includes an introduction to the theoretical and methodological foundations of Participatory Design, further details of the framework and its components (summarised below), examples of methods and case studies where these methods have been incorporated and guidelines for participatory best practice.
THE FRAMEWORK AND PRINCIPLES

The framework demonstrates how Participatory Design practices and methods can be integrated with the current evidence-base in the design of mental health interventions. In the framework (Figure 1) interventions are shaped through the direct involvement and input of young people and insights from the existing scholarly evidence base. Use of the framework is underpinned by three principles:

**Principle One**  
Young people are involved as active participants (co-designers) throughout the design process from problem setting to problem solving.

**Principle Two**  
Young people contribute as design partners; participating in idea generation as well as providing opinions and feedback on existing design concepts.

**Principle Three**  
Proposed interventions are understood and continually evaluated from the perspective of whether they are relevant, meaningful and engaging to the young people who stand to benefit from them, as well as from the perspective of their mental health impact.

Figure 1 Participatory Design framework for evidence-based online youth mental health interventions

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Methods which enable the active participation of young people

Identify the problem from the perspective of young people and the evidence base

**Define**

Identify the beneficiaries and define the problem space and objectives with them.

**Position**

Understand how the intervention needs to be positioned and framed in order to have impact for young people and relevance to young people.

**Concept**

Identify, generate and evaluate potential concepts that represent what the intervention needs to be and do to engage young people and deliver appropriate mental health and wellbeing outcomes.

**Create**

Evolve, build and refine an intervention that is useful and usable by young people and safe and effective from a mental health and wellbeing perspective.

**Use**

Deliver, use, evaluate and iterate the intervention based on how young people experience and use the intervention and its impact.

Evidence based research activities

Research questions which seek to understand the perspective and experiences of the young people who stand to benefit from the proposed interventions

Research questions which seek to understand the perspective of the evidence base

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At each phase of the design process young people have an opportunity to input into – and feedback on – proposed interventions. The design is progressed on the basis of research with young people and insights from the existing evidence base.

COMPONENTS OF THE FRAMEWORK

The core components of the framework are:

- Research questions which seek to identify the problem and generate and evaluate solutions from the perspective of young people as well as the evidence base.
- Participatory Design research methods which enable young people to actively contribute to the design process.
- Design artefacts which capture and communicate the research outcomes and act as tools to support cross-disciplinary collaborative work between researchers, young people and other stakeholders.

CASE STUDY: REACHOUT.COM

ReachOut.com is the Inspire Foundation’s flagship web-based health and wellbeing service for young people. A review of epidemiological data and National Mental Health Population Survey findings identified that only 20 percent of young men and 30 percent of young women experiencing mental health disorders were currently accessing services (ABS 2008). The ReachOut.com service is currently being redesigned in response to these findings. The ReachOut.com team is working directly with young people to understand how to broach the issue of mental health with those young people who do not currently seek help, and to identify ways to increase their help-seeking behaviours.

The new service is currently in the Create phase. The guide describes how a participatory approach has been taken to the Identify, Define, Position and Concept phases of the design process. We provide examples of how the ReachOut.com team is working with young people to understand what the service needs to be and do in order to be meaningful to this diverse group of young people.

A PARTICIPATORY APPROACH

A participatory approach to design allows us to:

- Understand the issues from the perspective of young people.
- Identify which issues young people think are important.
- Provide a way for young people to participate meaningfully in the design process regardless of their design or mental health expertise.
- Understand proposed interventions from the perspective of how they integrate into the existing ecology of young people’s lives.
- Understand proposed interventions in terms of how young people perceive the impact and benefit to them.
- Develop mental health interventions that are engaging and relevant to young people.

Involving young people meaningfully

For meaningful involvement to take place, young people must be:

- Fully informed of the topic/project.
- Provided with opportunities that are not tokenistic in nature.
- Listened to and their feedback used to inform the project.
- Aware of the expectations being set, which must be set at the start of an activity.
- Supported during their participation by staff that are available to answer questions and assist when problems arise.
- Resourced to participate – whether that is through skills development, increased knowledge and/or support.

Figure 2 The design process is made up of iterative cycles where input from the evidence base and the experiences of young people are brought together