

Variations on the ACT Theme

Can you make modifications to the Assertive Community Treatment (ACT) model and still be effective? Dr. Terry Krupa and Dr. Shirley Eastabrook of Queen's University are working with the staff of four community mental health programs in the Kingston and Brockville area to answer that question. Several critical features of ACT varied among the four programs, and the researchers want to understand those differences and how they affected clients. Their findings will help in the development of best practices for providing mental health care in Ontario

Why bother with another study of ACT?

Much has been written about ACT since the concept was first developed in Wisconsin in 1980. But this study is different. Variations on Assertive Community Treatment: A Study of Approaches and Client Outcomes of Four Teams in South Eastern Ontario looks at how ACT is working in this province and explores the tension between appropriate roles for ACT and the challenges faced by ACT as an integrated service delivery model.

Do current ACT standards meet client needs in Ontario?

The Variations study gathered information about the local client population that reveals some important differences between these ACT clients and those studied elsewhere.

American studies, for example, have generally reported substance abuse rates of 80%, which explains why ACT standards require a substance abuse expert for the team. Substance abuse rates for these Ontario clients, however, were much lower, even though the usual criteria for screening admissions to ACT were applied. This suggests that teams need to consider client profiles at a program level and allocate resources to meet identified needs, such as helping clients with employment.



Variations on Assertive Community Treatment research team (l-r): Shirley Eastabrook and Terry Krupa (Co-principal Investigators), Salinda Horgan (Project Coordinator)

The study results are also shedding light on areas of need that are rarely addressed directly in the ACT literature, such as parenting. Almost 40% of the clients of these ACT teams have children (20% have school-age children). (page 2)

What is ACT?

Assertive Community Treatment (ACT) was developed as an alternative to hospitalization for people with serious mental illness. ACT provides ongoing, individualized, intensive case management and helps clients develop the skills they need to live in the community.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT ACT, VISIT THE CMHEI WEBSITE AT WWW.ONTARIO.CMHA.CA/CMHEI.



More studies are needed on family relationships, especially those involving the children of clients. The study raises important issues such as the need to understand the parenting skills of people with mental illness and the implications of long-term separation of parents from their children.

Does ACT help people with housing?

ACT seemed to be successful at helping people find and maintain adequate independent living accommodation. While it is difficult to find affordable housing, the majority of ACT clients were living independently with support.

Does ACT help people with employment?

Initial research shows that these ACT teams spent little time on employment activities and client employment rates were very low. In the past year, all four teams have focused more service efforts in the vocational area, so the follow-up data may show an increase in the employment rate for clients. This shift in emphasis is consistent with the Ontario Ministry

of Health and Long-Term Care recommendations in *Making It Work: Policy Framework for Employment Supports for People with Serious Mental Illness* (2000).

What do clients say about ACT?

Clients in this study were generally very positive about ACT and how it has helped them. Coercion was rarely identified as an issue. Reported conflicts with ACT were most often related to finances (when controlled by a trustee) or medication. The structure of ACT, particularly the 24-hour coverage, individualized attention, and flexible approach to meeting client needs, supported the development of a positive relationship, which clients described as central to supporting their efforts to live in the community.

Variations on Assertive Community Treatment is one of eight studies being conducted as part of the Community Mental Health Evaluation Initiative. For more information, visit the CMHEI website at www.ontario.cmha.ca/cmhei.

Is ACT Consistent with Recovery Principles?

As the mental health field in Ontario embraces the recovery approach to mental health services, many have expressed concerns that ACT does not fit well with recovery principles and philosophy. The Variations on Assertive Community Treatment study explored the recovery-oriented practices of ACT. Evidence was gathered by the Participatory Action Research (PAR) team, a group of consumers involved in the Variations study as researchers.

Consistent with recovery practices, ACT encouraged clients to be active in directing their own lives and learning to manage their illness. Beyond delivering medications and monitoring symptoms of the illness, ACT helped clients to develop their own problem-solving and coping skills. PAR revealed that clients often felt they were their own mental health workers – they considered themselves part of the ACT team.

Less well addressed by the ACT programs were recovery practices oriented to active community participation and establishing community roles. While clients received a great deal of attention when they were acutely ill, at risk of hospitalization, and/or experiencing serious crises in the community, they felt that much less attention was paid to developing and improving their daily lives. They would like



Participatory Action Research team: front (l-r), Diane Lee, Shirley Eastabrook; back (l-r), Karen Percy, Louise Hern, Robert North, Terry Krupa; missing, Geoff Wing, Barbie Von Briesen

It's good to be in the position to ask other consumers these questions. We know the right questions to ask.

PAR MEMBER

more help to move forward, be more productive, and participate as empowered citizens in their community.

By placing more emphasis on community living and personal growth, ACT has the potential to go beyond routine maintenance or dealing with crises and acute illness, to promote mental health recovery.

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About CMHEI

The Community Mental Health Evaluation Initiative (CMHEI) is a provincial evaluation project conceived by the Ontario Mental Health Foundation, the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, and the Canadian Mental Health Association, Ontario Division. The goal of the initiative is to research and advocate solutions for major issues and problems in the mental health arena. Funding support provided by the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care is gratefully appreciated.

Contact Information

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