

GUIDE

# Creative Ideas for Mental Health Engagement



HSE  
Mental Health  
Engagement  
& Recovery



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# Creative Engagement

## Introduction to Creative Engagement

**Welcome to an invitation to work differently, to broaden the idea of participation and to practice using the imagination in ways that can lead to improved mental health services and also some fun and deep reflection.**

**The National Office for Mental Health Engagement and Recovery (MHER) believes:**

- 1. Everyone is creative.**
- 2. Creative skills can be learned and enhanced.**
- 3. Creative thinking can lead to positive and innovative change.**

**This guide is for anyone who believes or wants to explore creativity as a means of participation in engagement activities in mental health services.**

Drawing, making, conversing, storytelling, imagining, acting, visualising, dancing and relating to one another about topics of interest brings people together and enables empowering debates and plans for improvement. This way of working inspires hope and thus can build the trust that can sometimes be broken between systems and users of that system.

Within this document, you will find a number of ideas to promote innovation, reflection, problem-solving decision-making and skill-building in mental health engagement activity.

Competencies for working this way include facilitation skills, a willingness to use the imagination and a dedication to equal and reciprocal partnerships. The principles of mental health engagement support this work, **see Appendix 1.**

The ideas can be applied across the continuum of Mental Health Engagement and can be used in conjunction with MHER's **Guide to Mental Health Engagement Methods.**



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1. This document is adapted from the activity of *Imagine Chicago* and the collaboration and innovation techniques used in *Design Thinking*.

# Creative Activities



# Setting the Context

**Participant engagement begins with creating a space within which everyone can make a creative and constructive contribution.**

People determine quickly whether a space is safe and welcoming. The context must be set from the beginning to welcome participation, voice and experience. An agenda and resource materials provide helpful orientation and focus.

- > Setting round tables of eight in advance with paper of various colours and sizes, markers, pens and colourful post-it notes signals that the time together will be creative and fun and that the work of the day will be shared conversation around tables.
- > Having summary statements in poster form on the wall at the start of a meeting summarising reports previously done honours prior work and encourages building on that foundation.
- > Having markers, glitter, feathers, stickers with which to decorate name tags indicates that everyone brings something special and that creativity is valued.

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# Living Questions

## Overview

**Having people articulate questions in conversation creates an identity as a community eager to learn and invites relationships with others present.**

Here are several ways to get to know participants quickly and focus attention on the task at hand by gathering their questions:

### A.

Organise table introductions around the theme of the gathering in a way that focuses attention on the topic at hand, showcases experience, encourages questions and gathers hopes. For example, if the theme is expanding recovery knowledge, ask participants to introduce themselves to one another by sharing something that encourages their recovery, a current question that has drawn them to the session and a hope for this time together. Post their responses on the wall to create a road map for your time together. or ....

### B.

Take a piece of flip chart paper for each participant. Fold it in half and tear out a headspace so it can be worn as a sandwich board. On the front side, invite every participant to write a "living question" they would like to be in dialogue about with others. On the back side, ask them to write something they are currently doing to pursue that question. Have the group mingle, observe each other's questions and find 6-8 people whose questions attract them and form a small interest group. Then have each person share the life history of their question. After they have shared these life histories, have each team decide collectively on 2-3 questions they would like the whole group to discuss.

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## The Shape of Hope

### Overview

**Invite people as they are gathering: “If you would like, please draw an image that represents the shape of your hope for the future.”**

Participants begin drawing at their tables, spontaneously also explaining what they are doing to others as they join the table. The activity lasts about ten minutes, enough time to have many people create an image and for latecomers to arrive. Once the session has begun, invite anyone who wants to share their image of the shape of hope. Once a number has been shared, post the images and ask the group what they notice. This activity creates an identity as a community of hope. What people care about will be honoured and not judged by others.

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## Hope Rocks

### Overview

**A simple question and ritual can make operating from hope a daily group practice.**

Take a small stone and pass it around a circle. As each participant holds it, ask them to name one event that week that has given them hope.

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## Sketch Storm (Design Thinking)

### Overview

**At the end of an engagement event or activity, have everyone sketch pictures of the top 3 to 5 ideas of the day/event.**

This will help focus attention on the best ideas and continue to flesh them out. Use scraps of paper or sticky notes.

You can also use sketching as a warm-up activity by asking everyone to pair up and draw each other in 30 seconds.

Visual ideas are often more memorable. Tapping into the part of your brain you use to draw gets people thinking in a new way and feeling more comfortable sharing early stage ideas.



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## Buy / Sell

### Overview

**Participants introduce themselves to someone they don't already know by sharing why they have come and a special talent or skill they have.**

Creating learning partnerships is important.

Participants introduce themselves to someone they don't already know by sharing why they have come and a special talent or skill they have. In mixed groups of 8, invite them to introduce themselves to one another by identifying some items on their personal buy/sell list — the 'sell' side comprised of talents, skills, interests or values they bring to any group situation, and the 'buy' side comprised of skills or qualities they want to learn or develop.

Groups often discover surprising 'matches' between their buy/sell lists. This encourages everyone to identify themselves as joint participants in an already present learning community. A short debriefing can raise awareness of the range of both skills and learning priorities within the group and the ready availability of learning partners.

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## Portrait Activity Drawing out Strengths

### Overview

**This activity can be used in a variety of ways - a way of demonstrating the power of social construction, a way of helping participants practice seeing each other's strengths, or as a way of affirming every participant's skills and ability to contribute to a common task.**

Completed portraits can be mounted on the wall and become a location for adding post-it notes with additional strengths, skills, values and talents as they become visible through group activities.

Set up: Half the participants sit in inner circles of 4 chairs facing out and half sit in outside circles of four chairs facing in. Every person in the inner circle is facing a person from the outer circle. Each person in the outside circle is given a coloured pencil or marker and a piece of drawing paper. The people in the outside circle are the portrait artists. They will begin or help complete a portrait/visual rendering of the head and shoulders of the person facing them in the inner circle, as well as documenting at least one strength they discover through interviewing them while they are drawing.

During each round of drawing a question is asked by the artist, the answer to which is added to the bottom of the portrait or included somehow in the visual rendering. The questions can be adapted depending on the purpose of the gathering. A good general set of questions might be, for example:

- 1.** What is something you know about? (head)
- 2.** What is something you care about? (heart)
- 3.** What's something you like to do with your hands? (hands)
- 4.** What's a direction you want to move this year (or a place you stand, that people can count on you to be or do?) (feet)
- 5.** The act of illustration for each artist lasts about 60 seconds. In each round, the people in the outside circle draw the person in front of them, from the shoulders up, and also interview them with that round's question provided by the facilitator. When time is called, the paper with the portrait stays on the chair opposite its subject but the artists in the outside circle all move one position around the circle so they are now facing a new person and continuing to complete a portrait that has been started by someone else. They continue embellishing that portrait and asking the next question. This changing of positions continues until all four questions have been asked and the portraits completed and the outside circle has gone the whole round. The last person completing each portrait gets the person of whom it has been drawn to add their signature to their portrait so it is identifiable by others once hung up in the room.

Then the outside circle shifts to become the inner circle.

Round 2 is repeated exactly as round one but with a new set of artists and subjects. When all have had their portrait/visual rendering done, the portraits are hung on the wall to create a gallery of all the participants (with names visible) so people can recognize each person's creative rendering. The portraits can become places for adding more strengths the group notices about each individual as the group work continues.

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# Storytelling Game: Inspiring Possibility

## Overview

**Everyone loves a good story. This activity allows stories to be shared, listened to carefully and brought into performance.**

The story prompt can vary. The “storytelling game” is organised as follows:

- > Within each group of eight, participants divide themselves into four pairs.
- > Each person in the pairs decides to be **A** or **B**.
- > Facilitator asks a question of the group (e.g., tell me about an experience of empowerment, a vivid story of something you have seen with your own eyes when you said to yourself that people working together really can make a difference... or a story when you learned something that changed what was possible for you).
- > **A** tells a short vivid story to their partner **B** in two minutes.
- > **B** tells **A** her story back, in the first person, making it **B's** story. Two minutes.
- > **B** tells **A** his story in two minutes.
- > **A** tells **B** his story back, in the first person, making it **A's** story. Two minutes.
- > **A** and **B** in each pair decide which story to share with another pair in a group of four. If **A's** story is chosen, **B** tells it. If **B's** story is chosen, **A** tells it.
- > Group one in the group of four tells its story to group two. Two minutes.
- > Group two tells group one its story. Two minutes.
- > The group of four decides which story to share with another group of four.
- > Group one in the group of four tells its story to group two. Two minutes.
- > Group two tells group one its story. Two minutes.
- > The group of eight then decides which story, or composite story, to enact, 'put on its feet'.
- > The group of eight has 5-7 minutes to rehearse their chosen story.
- > Each group acts out their scene.

When all groups have performed, they have brought to life a portrait of this group of people at this moment around the chosen topic (e.g. as an empowered community, a learning community, a community of resilience.)

Sharing and enacting powerful stories invited people to see and move into a bigger story. It offers an experience of transcendence, an act in which people feel honoured and see the power of their lives magnified.

Narrative4 is a company with a base in Limerick that focuses on building bridges, connections and empathy through their **Story Exchange method**. Their evidence-based methodology works particularly well with young people. See here for more information <https://narrative4.ie/story-exchange/>



# Appreciative Inquiries (AI)

**Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a tool for including all of the voices in the community or organisation, AI leverages the most positive possibilities in communities and organisations.**

Unlike the traditional problem-based tools and models that focus on what is not working well, AI focuses on what is working well (appreciative) by engaging people in asking questions and telling stories (inquiry). Through constructive dialogue, new possibilities are then imagined and new partnerships created to bring the desired future into being.

Communities, organisations and groups globally are adopting AI methods to cultivate hope, build capacity, unleash collective appreciation and imagination and bring about positive change. Imagine Chicago is one of the best-known examples of applying AI in community settings. IC works to understand the best of what is, imagine what can be and create what will be. For more on AI, [click here.](#)

## Appreciative Inquiry ideas

- > How and why did you get involved?
- > Who else was involved?
- > How did you work together?
- > What made it a powerful experience?
- > What were some challenges you had to deal with and did you deal with those challenges?
- > What did you accomplish and how did it feel?
- > What was especially meaningful to you about the process and result?
- > What did you learn about how positive community change happens?

## Best qualities and skills

**Yourself:** Without being too humble, what is it that you value most about yourself as an active community member? What are your best qualities, skills, values, etc.?

**Others:** Why does working together make sense? What are the benefits and outcomes of forming strong community partnerships across generations?

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# Key Stages of Appreciative Inquiry

## Setting Affirmative Topics

**What affirmative topics do you feel would be good points for an appreciative inquiry to connect the words based on community assessment that builds community capacity and engagement?**

**Good Appreciative Inquiry questions** are positive and expansive; they elicit deeply held values, passions and the best of what is e.g. *“What do you especially value about your mental health service/engagement activity? What’s your favourite place that supports recovery? Why?”*

### 1. Creating Open-Ended Constructive Questions:

Create a question you could ask anyone that would create a positive relationship with that person and get a constructive thoughtful response:

*“What stands out for you as a time you felt you were involved in a really good mental health engagement effort-- something significant, empowering and effective—that gave everyone involved a way to contribute their talent and make a difference?”*

### 2. Provocative Propositions:

Create a concise provocative proposition around one of your affirmative topic choices that inspires people to be more curious about it and want to think it through in their own experience. A provocative proposition invites and inspires you to think more deeply about a topic e.g. Honest communication opens possibilities.

**Yourself:** *“Without being too humble, what is it that you value most about yourself as an active participant in this work? What are your best qualities, skills, values, etc.?”*

**Others:** *“Why does working together make sense? What are the benefits and outcomes of forming strong partnerships across mental health stakeholder groups?”*

### 3. Moving from Inquiry into Action:

What are some ways that your inquiry could provoke action?

*“As you think about what it takes to build great partnerships, (especially across cultures or generations), what is the “life-giving” factor in such partnerships (without this, good partnerships would not be possible)?”*  
What might be a tangible result of this inquiry?

**Design:** *“What do you think are some of the essential conditions to enable your community/your country as a whole to prosper?”*

**Destiny:** *“What do you consider important next steps that should be taken?”*

- *To get more people involved in making a positive difference?*
- *To help develop more productive, inspiring community partnerships?*
- *To improve communication?*
- *What support do you most need to plant your highest dream for the future? Who do you most want/need as your dream team/ dream keepers?*

Communities move in the direction of what they ask about. An affirmative topic serves as an orientation point for values and practices to strengthen in the community. Example: clear and regular communication, youth as resources, closing the feedback loop.

### Crystal Ball

Organise small teams around their visions of a future worthy of their investment. Ask them to imagine themselves in the future at a certain time after the unparalleled success of their venture. Have each team ‘remember’ all the factors that contributed to its being such an unqualified success — to describe and explain in detail what had happened in the organising on behalf of the desired dream that accounted for high participation and community involvement. Ask them to produce an extensive list of ‘what worked’. Place the lists so they can be viewed by everyone. Use these as the starting point for planning next steps.

## Futures Triangle

A prominent futurist in Australia named Sohail Inayatullah ( [www.metafuture.org](http://www.metafuture.org) ) has conceptualised a way of thinking about the future that places the domain of motivation and calling as an important source of energy. It is a simple conceptual framework many find very helpful called the Futures Triangle: Think of a triangle with the three points marked PULL PUSH WEIGHT.

Sohail distinguishes three dimensions in mapping the future.

Certain things **push** us into the future (shifts in technology, demographic changes, unanticipated disasters like the Covid 19, resource scarcity).

**Weights** of current arrangements offset this momentum for change (political structures with misaligned terms, investment in services that do not work well, cultural patterns and mindsets that expect services to be a certain way). Strategic planning activities often focus most attention on these pushes and weights that are known.

The third part of future planning – **pull** – is comparatively neglected, attending to those things that attract and call us forward. Human beings seek purpose and meaning. We like to be inspired; we can move in the direction of our intentions. Powerful ideas and images - an animating vision, shared purpose, spirituality and the promise of life that our children and grandchildren vividly represent to us - can pull us into the future.

Vision-focused conversations can mobilise energy and willingness to move in a new direction because they connect to our human need for purpose, meaning, direction and inspiration. Images have the power to move us in a particular direction; they orient our choices. Positive images generate positive actions.

It is powerful in any group, at any time, to refresh the sense of intention and to explore motivations and intentions. For example: Think for a minute about the images of hope that have authority in your personal and professional life and what you tell others about what is possible. Think about the images and stories that have inspired you over these past few days. Think about and represent a small change in your community that could make a big difference, something so compelling and important you feel you must help that change happen.



# Shifting Frames: Moving Towards Constructive Change

## Reframing Tool

**How can we hold space for people's anger and frustration but re-direct it to a constructive end?**

Here's a framework for helping people shift to naming what they do want rather than staying with what they don't want to do.

- As people articulate dreams or hopes, place them in the (+) column.
- Frustrations or complaints are recorded in the don't want (-) column.

The facilitator can share *"anger is simply an energy that says things need to be different"*. The facilitator shares *"I am trying to understand what that difference is so we can organise in that direction. So I am going to put what you're frustrated about in the 'don't want' category."*

The facilitator invites participants to name what they DO want (on the premise that every complaint is a frustrated dream.)

Hopes, dreams +	Don't want -	Do want	Constructive future

As the reframing continues, other people may announce reservations or resistance to the hope being articulated. Facilitators listen to these 'buts' as naming things necessary to keep in view but help the participant reframe their skepticism as a question that moves in the direction of the desired good. For example, *"the HSE will never fund that"* becomes *"Where can we find the necessary funding?"* The facilitator consistently holds the space for the conversation to head somewhere constructive.

Indicators of exactly what that constructive future looks like concretely can be placed in the far right-hand column. Participants can then be asked to discuss in small groups shifts they see as necessary right now and what they will take to achieve.

## Conversations of the Edges

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### Tradition, Innovation, Management

Effective change requires a variety of gifts and competencies. It must build on the best of the past, hold space for an emerging better future and effectively manage necessary transitions. It can be helpful for participants in a change process to notice the interplay of past, present and future (tradition, innovation and the management of change) and to actively and constantly create space for each to be honoured. Here is a helpful commentary for facilitating this insight and conversation.

Change happens at the intersection of the past, present and future. In a change process, it's important not to privilege the voice of innovation over the other two voices. If you privilege the innovative voice, you risk neglecting the past as an inventory of trustworthy possibilities; the past shows and builds confidence in what has worked in a meaningful way. Everyone needs to feel their perspective and contribution is valuable to the change process. If the voice of innovation is the preference, you may encounter resistance from conservators defending the legacy they feel is being neglected. Similarly, managers of change who excel in organising details and structures of a change process, also need to be kept engaged at every stage.

You can honour each voice in the process through a series of questions that draw on those competencies and encourage constructive dialogue in the middle. For example, if the innovator is dreaming boldly, the facilitator can ground the dreaming by asking the manager, *"What and how long would it take to get that vision implemented? How much would it cost?"* The historian can be asked *"How can this new project build on what we've already done so that investment and legacy can be carried forward?"*

## Visual Tools

**Drawing in images as well as words can capture clarity, movement, focus and dimensionality in visioning and action conversations and activate multiple intelligences and perspectives.**

It is a wonderful way of gathering a group story as it unfolds and capturing high-energy moments in a collective process. Whenever possible team up with graphic facilitators and teach rudimentary graphic recording skills to workshop participants so they can also experiment with multiple ways of seeing and documenting progress being made.

The following example is from the visual record of MHER's 2023 Conference. The graphic facilitator was [www.hazelhurley.com](http://www.hazelhurley.com)



### Activity Organisers

**Clear visual organisers for capturing conversations and action plans can help order thoughts and provide good, consistent and self-organising documentation from an event or project.**

Dream Planting/ Action Planning Worksheet - Small Groups pick one dream that you'd like to act on where citizen engagement can make a difference.

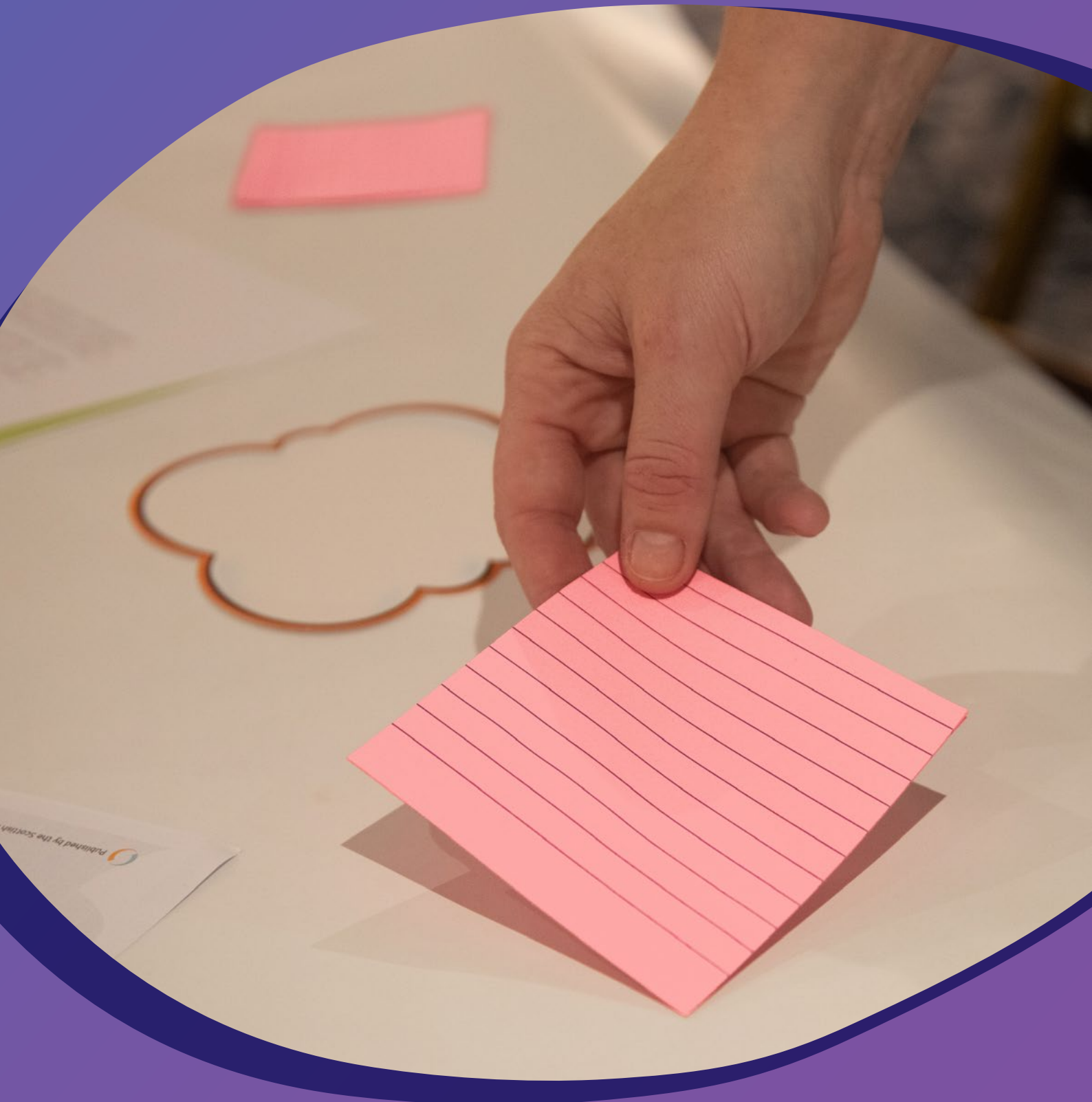
Summarise your vision of something that would make your mental health setting a more vital, sustainable community that you are committed to working for:

- 1.** Conduct a brainstorm that elicits many different ways of acting on behalf of this vision. List as many ideas and resources as possible. Build on each other's ideas. Be bold, be creative, be imaginative. (20 minutes)
- 2.** Evaluate the ideas that you think as a group are most important and possible to implement. (10 minutes)
- 3.** Develop a set of recommended actions you are prepared to take (45 minutes).

Here are some questions that may help prompt your conversation:

- How will this contribute to improving the quality of life for everyone? How will this contribute to the flourishing of the service? How can we contribute? What is our role?
- What is needed from government or other public institutions?
- What role can the local university play?
- What resources are needed?
- What will encourage individuals and institutions to invest in this dream?
- What steps are needed to be taken now and longer term to attract the energy and investment of others?
- Who will provide leadership to this effort?
- What strategic partners are needed?
- What's the next thing that's needed to build on the momentum generated today?

Ask for a volunteer note-taker to bring your ideas back to the full group and enlist their support.



# Open Space Technology (OST)

**In Open Space, groups self-organise to create their agendas and activities. Shared leadership and diversity are celebrated, as every person within the group has a meaningful role and**

**responsibility.**



Read more about Open Space Technology [here](#)

Open Space Technology typically begins by the group sitting together in a circle. Their time together (be it three hours or one day) is divided into discrete periods (usually 60-90 minutes each). Each person in the group is asked to identify the issues they most want to discuss, around a common theme. When someone proposes an idea, s/he is agreeing to host the discussion — not to answer the question or give the solution, but simply to help facilitate a conversation about that topic. The topic, its time slot, and the location for the discussion are posted together on a large chart visible to the entire group. The number of topics per time slot varies, depending on the size of the group and time and space constraints. Each small group is asked to report on its discussion to the whole group at the end of the meeting.

Once all the topics are posted, the different members of the group move around and join discussions according to the Law of Two Feet and the Four Principles. The Law of Two Feet asks each person to use their two feet to go to the spaces where they can learn and make constructive contributions. If they feel unable to contribute or learn in a given space, they may move flexibly and freely to another one.

The Four Principles, that guide Open Space Technology are:

- 1. Whoever comes are the right people.**
- 2. Whatever happens is the only thing that could have.**
- 3. Whenever it starts is the right time.**
- 4. When it's over, it's over.**



The system encourages dialogue, listening and questioning. It draws upon self-motivation and mutual respect to think through ideas and generate actions. Since each person takes responsibility for the outcome of the gathering, frustration and finger-pointing that often plague group meetings are replaced by passionate learning through personal and collective sharing. In this way, Open Space Technology complements the belief that engaged citizens catalyse and create open spaces for dialogue and collective action.

## Empowering Action

### Aligning ideas with energy and actions

People find the energy to create the future they have imagined when there are structures that support collective action on behalf of their visions. Focusing on individual and collective preferred futures (goals worth aiming at) also helps identify abilities, skills, and actions needed to get there.

To be productive, imagination sessions need to be followed by a very practical focus on *“Where do we go from here and how and with whom? What applications do we have in mind? How will we live out the values and aspirations we have identified?”*

## Brainstorming Bursts



Before beginning this exercise share these DOVE guidelines with your team:

- D** Defer judgment
- O** Offbeat ideas encouraged
- V** Vast number of ideas sought
- E** Expand on other people's ideas

### Exploring Ideas

Open space technology provides one way for organising issues and interests to move forward. It can begin by hosting brainstorming sessions around a community issue on which the host moving to action wants input. The host opens the session by stating what they hope to accomplish. The group as a whole then generates ideas and afterward evaluates the most promising ones for moving forward. As appropriate, people can then claim relevant roles and responsibilities.

Brainstorming allows a group of people to develop bold new ideas or concepts. It is generally used as a first step in creative visioning and invites the equal participation of all group members in a freewheeling, energy-producing, visioning process without the fear of criticism. Engaging your team in this very important step in the decision-making process translates into a feeling of ownership and responsibility for the success of the project. And it's fun!

All you need is a flip chart or writing surface large enough to be seen by all participants, a volunteer to record the ideas and a comfortable setting that encourages creativity.

While conducting a brainstorming activity remember these simple guidelines:

- The bolder the idea the better. It will encourage compelling and unique ideas.
- Suspend all criticism or evaluation of any suggestions. Encourage all ideas!
- Quantity not quality is the key. Evaluation comes later.
- Encourage improvements and continuation of ideas. Bolder ideas are often inspired by building on someone else's idea, sometimes even in a way which is the opposite of the original suggestion!

Here are some tips to get the most out of your brainstorm:

- Conduct a brainstorm during the early part of action planning
- Review the above guidelines with all participants
- Keep sessions short –15 to 30 minutes.
- Focus the brainstorm on a simple action-oriented question.
- Encourage ALL members of the group to contribute their ideas and build on each other's ideas.
- Separate the idea-generating (brainstorm) process from the evaluation process to generate as many ideas as possible.

After completing the brainstorming portion of the exercise, give the team time to review the suggestions. With the focus person who has invited the brainstorm as the lead, as a group:

- Cull list for duplication.
- Clarify ideas.
- Order/group ideas.
- Evaluate and review ideas.
- Develop a method of narrowing the list to the best and most feasible idea(s).
- Report on the results of your brainstorm to other interested teams and specify ways they can become involved in moving the idea/project forward.



## Dream Pair Share

### Aligning Vision and Action

Invite individuals to draw on cards 3 phrases and images that describe their service as they most want it to be in 20 years. Ask them to write or draw only those things to which they are deeply committed personally. When they are finished, invite them to share in pairs their visions and the reasons behind them. Each pair decides on three dreams they would like to bring to the larger group.

The pairs write their choices on moveable pieces of paper and put them on a dream wall. Once the group's images are all up, invite the group to cluster similar dreams and title the clusters. Have each person pick the cluster to which they are most drawn. Working in small groups, flesh out the dreams into actionable steps. One way is to brainstorm as many action steps as possible for 10 minutes and then spend several more minutes sorting for the ones that are highest impact and most readily accomplished. When the groups share their action plans, ask for volunteers to serve as advocates for moving each idea forward. Those who would like to work with them say so.

## Standing in the Future

### Sustaining this Community

Imagine yourself a year from now looking back at what you have created with your team and the difference it has made. As you think about what has happened...

- What key results have you accomplished that people see have made a difference?
- What have you and others done to keep the vision at the heart of the project alive and engaging?
- Who has been involved?
- How has their active leadership been encouraged?
- What are they now able to do as a result of their involvement?
- What new structures for ongoing involvement now exist (or what old structures have been strengthened) as a result of your project (e.g. new youth mental health group, school-service partnership, newsletter, wellness garden, etc.)
- What else have you done to sustain your project's impact?
- What activities can/will you do with your own team now to set in motion planning for the long-term?

1. At our next meeting, I/we will...
2. On an ongoing basis, I/we will...
3. Now add to the Resource Bank for Sustaining Impact

Some key elements of sustaining a community development:

- Keeping the vision alive as a shared vision (having whole team feel ownership in the result).
- Mobilizing energy and commitment: things find a way to happen. People's commitment sustains the project. Sharing responsibility and leadership.
- Focus: action plans, calendars, organizing grids to keep vision alive and keep people focused on the next steps.
- Seeing results that matter.
- Clear communication: being able to articulate and summarize your story.
- Connections/Relationships: to organizations, to others doing similar things, to outside resources.
- Constant Learning: wanting to improve.
- Documenting and evaluating the project. Learning from the project experience. Seeking tips, facts and relationships that will keep the project thriving and growing.
- Other? (add your own ideas...)



# Harvesting Learning

**Learning is much more likely to create changes in behaviour if it is brought to consciousness and new commitments and practices are publicly claimed and affirmed. Here are multiple activities for doing this.**

## Learning Accelerator

Create a circle and practice passing a clap around the circle from one person to the next. Try changing directions too. Once the group has established a rhythm, have participants name things they have learned together and pass their learnings around the circle as a clap wave in both directions to show how someone's learning can accelerate learning for others.

## A Learning Dance

Organise participants in a circle and ask for volunteers to share something they learned this week or this month. Have them suggest a motion that captures that learning (like moving your legs in a circular motion for learning to ride a bicycle.) Have everyone in the group imitate the motion. Then ask for a second volunteer and repeat the process with them. This time add the two motions together. Do this 6-8 times until there is a long sequence of community learning motions. Set the dance to music or rhythm and perform it as a community learning celebration dance.

## Stepping Stones

### Individual Reflection (15 minutes)

Identify stepping stones for your project – important markers that come to mind when you reflect on the course your project has taken from the beginning until now. Stepping stones are significant points of movement that have brought you to where you are today. They represent a continuity of development despite shifts and setbacks.

- > Reflect on the flow of choices and events, directions and detours your project has taken. These may be different stages in its development. They may include significant people who have influenced the project's direction, events that marked a change in direction, ideas or insights that gave you a new understanding of what was needed or how to accomplish it. Think back to when you first had the idea that you are now working on or the point where others first joined together

with you to act on it. Think of important things you learned or contacts you made.

Now take a few minutes to jot down six or seven major stepping stones that have brought you to where you are now in your project. Put those events onto your project's "life-line" (a timeline with space to annotate important markers)

- Now take a few more minutes to look forward. What are the major stepping stones you know are still on the horizon to fully implement your project? If you had to set a "graduation date", a time you expect that your project will be visible to others in the community, when would that be? Mark this date on your project's lifeline and draw a picture of what you hope will be visible.

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### **In Small Groups of 3-4: (30 minutes)**

Share your stepping stones with each other one at a time.

- After everyone has shared their stepping stones, talk about what you noticed when you did your stepping stones and listened to others.
- As you look forward to the future, what structures and encouragement do you feel will be necessary/helpful to keep your project moving forward?

Have someone take notes on differences, similarities, surprises and lessons learned.

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### **Large group conversation: (30 minutes)**

- Talk about reflections from small groups.
- Each team presents their lifelines briefly and posts on a common chart.

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### **Create group impact charts (15 minutes)**

Write on post-it notes how you think your project is making a difference in each of the following categories. Write as many notes in each category as you would like.

- How I am different
- How the community is different
- How I would like to help sustain my project's progress and build ongoing connections

Create a group chart to gather reflections and impacts in each category.

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## Closing Circle

Closing circle, a space of shared hope and acknowledgment, for naming what had been most useful, and how people want to take forward what they have learned.

Questions are typically: *“What was a highlight for you?”*  
*What is one way you will use something you have learned here?*  
*What next step do you plan to take?”*

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## Checking Out

Ask the simple open question: *“How have you experienced this day/event/meeting?”*

Ask notetaker to gather responses on a flipchart.



# Creative Problem Solving

Dealing with obstacles and challenges is part of life and overcoming them isn't always easy. To enhance the delivery mental health services an organisation can encourage and facilitate creative thinking. Solving problems in creative ways can help an organisation find innovative solutions.

**Creative problem solving (CPS) is about solving problems or identifying opportunities when conventional thinking has failed. It helps to find fresh perspectives. It helps people come up with innovative solutions so that they can formulate a plan to overcome obstacles and reach goals set for better services that work for the people who use them and the people who work in them.**

**Creative Problem Solving (CPS) involves breaking down a problem to understand it, coming up with multiple ideas to solve the problem and reviewing those ideas to find the most effective solutions. It uses techniques to make the problem-solving process engaging and collaborative.**

**To learn more about Creative Problem Solving and Design Thinking techniques look [here](#).**



# Creative Ideas (Writing)

**These exercises are adapted for mental health engagement activities.**

It is important to always offer non-literacy-based opportunities alongside these exercises to ensure all participants are and feel included.



## Throwing Snowballs



After the activity, participants will be able to:

**Compose** brief, pointed responses that deepen their knowledge and thinking about the topic - compare and contrast their responses to those of other participants.

**Clarify** and better articulate their thoughts in response to the questions/ prompts in subsequent engagement activities.

## A Free-Writing and Sharing Exercise

### Materials needed

- Sheets of paper
- Pens or markers
- Three or four questions related to mental health service provision and/or assigned reading.

Sample Questions:

*"Is there enough Lived Experience representation in the Sharing the Vision working groups? If not, why not?"*

*"In your view, what is the most complex challenge for mental health services and why?"*

*"What element of the mental health service is most important to you? Why?"*

*"If you could speak to the CEO of the Health Service today, what is one question you would like to ask and why?" (graduate-level seminar)*

### Introduction

Introduction should take 1 minute.

*"We are going to do a snowball activity, which will help you reflect on some important questions for our topic today. As you know, to write is to think. I am going to ask you four questions on the issue we're discussing today and we're going to free-write for several minutes as a way to collect our thoughts and get deeper into our topic. There are no right or wrong ways to do this. The goal is to write. Even if you're unsure of how to respond, that's okay— just write about why you are unsure."*

### Procedures

#### Step 1: Free-Writing

Ask participants to take out a sheet of paper and divide it into four rectangles, either using a pen or just folding it in half both ways. They should number each box one through four. Instruct them not to write their names anywhere on the page. The facilitator asks the first question and gives them three to six minutes to write a response in one of the squares.

#### Step 2: Sharing the Snowballs

Ask participants to make "snowballs" by crumpling up their papers when they are done writing. (Be prepared for surprised looks!). Ask participants to toss their snowballs across the room on a count of three. Make sure that everyone gets a new snowball. Tell everyone to unfold the snowballs and, going around the room, ask them to take turns reading aloud the written responses in front of them. Listen for common themes or interesting responses. The facilitator



takes notes on the responses to gain a sense of participants' engagement with the topic. The notes will provide a springboard to guide discussion later.

### Step 3: Repeating the Activity

Repeat steps one and two as outlined above

Closure/Evaluation: Close the activity by asking participants to share thoughts and comments. Can they identify any common themes or unique replies? You can use one of the responses or themes that emerged from the exercise to segue into the next segment or topic.

### Activity Analysis

The snowball is versatile because it is easy to implement, requires minimal preparation, draws participants into writing and discussion, and can be used in virtually any discipline/topic. Participants might enjoy it because they can share their point-of-view without having to develop their ideas, which may not be fully formed yet.

## Picture Prompts

**This activity involves writing a story about an image. Its steps include:**

1. Choose a photo and display it before the class or group like the one below from a **photovoice** project.<sup>1</sup>
2. Set a timer.
3. Ask everyone to write a story inspired by the photo, without planning or focusing on the correct structure.

This exercise encourages creativity because images can be more inspiring than text. Each person interprets the things they see differently.

The sharing of the stories will prompt conversation and help identify themes for service improvement.

2. Images might derive from a photovoice project that involved mental health stakeholders. See Good Practice in Mental Health Engagement booklet on MHER website.



## What if?

**The “what if” challenge is a writing activity that encourages individuals to analyse a topic and find the links between details and information.**

The facilitator creates fun or humorous hypothetical questions (or have each group member provide one), such as, *“What if your mental health service was in your local shopping centre?”* or *“What if my mental health needs are met?”* Randomly give each writer a question to respond to, or have them draw questions from a container. Set a time limit to complete the activity.

This exercise helps develop creative writing skills. It also helps individuals understand how asking “what if” questions can help inspire them when they don’t know where to start.

## Diary Entry

**Asking individuals to write a diary entry to their future self is an engaging writing activity that allows them to practice personal or journal writing.**

Give the group a future time point to focus on, such as college graduation, starting a new job, feeling strong in their recovery, or celebrating a family milestone. You can turn the diary entry assignment into a series of writing activities addressing various milestones in the future that the individuals identify. This exercise encourages imagination and reflective thought that can help to future-proof ideas for mental health service improvement ideas.

# Closing

**This guide is a jumping-off point for anyone who wishes to facilitate and participate in creative engagement. The possibilities are endless so please continue to create and explore as you work.**

# Appendix 1:

## The Principles of HSE Mental Health Engagement

Principle	What does this mean
<b>Person-Led</b>	Create an environment that accepts and values the uniqueness of everyone's experiences and perspectives on services. Make people feel like they belong, that they matter. Embrace the curiosity, creativity and expertise of all stakeholders.
<b>Respect</b>	Hold authentic motivation to work together to improve services. Be empathetic, civil and transparent in all communications. Listen to, learn about and challenge assumptions. All stakeholders have access to relevant and credible information related to engagement objectives and practical support to strategically engage in conversations and decision-making.
<b>Collaboration</b>	Aim to work in co-production. Be in genuine, trustworthy partnerships. When co-production is not possible, be clear that you agree to engage to inform, educate, consult, involve, or co-design.
<b>Equity</b>	Be inclusive of diverse experiences and perspectives. Give weight and dignity to the specific experiences of people from seldom heard communities and oppose all forms of discrimination whether based on ability, ethnicity, age, gender, social circumstances, religious belief or sexual preference.
<b>Response</b>	Take action with the intent to impact the information received, in a timely manner. Where this is not possible, be clear about the reason. Focus on growth and positive change and develop better outcomes, services and experiences.
<b>Empowerment</b>	Build relationships where people feel comfortable to discuss their feelings and what they want, focus on strengths and abilities, respecting the decisions a person makes about their own life.
<b>Accountability</b>	This principle expects organisations to live up to their commitments, for instance in the delivery of services and behaviour towards all stakeholders and the collection of evidence for engagement. Close the loop by reporting back to stakeholder groups and evaluating all efforts.
<b>Acknowledgment</b>	Promote and celebrate the value and success of engagement activities to underline its impact and inspire future engagement.
<b>Courage</b>	Hold a willingness and ability to lead and to challenge the status quo when necessary.



**National Office of Mental Health  
Engagement and Recovery**

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