
Challenges in evaluating self-help: Oxford Houses Evaluation, 2002-2005

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Who is involved?

Evaluation team: Bridget Roberts, Dr Lynda Berends.

Funding source: Ian Potter Foundation, via Oxford Houses Australia.

Collaborators:



Oxford Houses Australia 1

- Safe, affordable, self-managed, shared housing for people in recovery.
- Drinking or drugging means moving out.
- No time limit on stay.
- Voluntary Board and two part-time Resource Workers.
- Currently six houses and 25 residents.



Oxford Houses Australia 2

- Inspired by US Oxford Houses (established 1975) (www.oxfordhouse.org).
- Close, but not affiliated to, AA and NA.
- Mainly self-funded, with assistance from philanthropic trusts and DHS.



Objectives

- Illuminate how OHA works, for whom and in what circumstances
- Enable comparison of residents' outcomes with the wider A&D treatment-seeking population and with US research

Uses for the evaluation

- Improve processes
- Help OHA members introduce OHA to prospective members
- Help clinicians to educate clients about what to expect from OHA
- Inform policy makers about the role of OHA within wider systems

Methods

- Four interviews at six-monthly intervals with new residents
- Key informant interviews
- Annual focus groups with residents to explore key questions and issues
- Residents' personal contributions such as writings, photographs and artwork
- Review of relevant research literature

Challenges/opportunities

- Is the evaluation in harmony with self help principles?
- Will it provide data to satisfy lay, academic and professional audiences?

Ways of reaching different audiences

- Variety of rich data
- Style and language of written report.
- Face to face reporting.
- Opportunities for feedback.



Harmony with self help principles

Some features of self help:

- AA - 'to stay sober and to help others to find sobriety.'
- NA - 'members learn from one another how to live drug-free and recover from the effects of addiction in their lives.'
- Shared beliefs about addiction and recovery.
- Shared process (the 12 steps).
- Voluntary, self supporting, face to face meetings, open sharing.



How self help helps evaluation

- Habit of participation and mutual support
- Story telling and listening skills
- Expectation of service
- Participants are responsible for making the houses work, so can be keen to evaluate



Some significant moments - 1

- 'We're alchies – don't ask us – just tell us.'
- In fact a diverse population



Significant moment 2

- 'Are you in recovery yourself?'
 - Think about effect of reply

Researcher self-disclosure

- Conventional positivistic line
 - Be impersonal
 - Do not contaminate the purity of the information
- Naturalistic, constructivist line
 - Disclosure can be important in developing rapport
 - Can address power imbalance.



Researcher self disclosure issues

- Respect and trust between interviewer and interviewee
- Risks in the research/service delivery community – stigmatisation

What the round table group said on the day

- Self-disclosure - supported openness.
- Evaluation design - suggested it would be timely to work with the evaluation's Advisory Group to define their key questions more narrowly.

