

Auseinet Forum - Putting It All Together: A National Forum on Promotion, Prevention and Early Intervention for Mental Health, Adelaide, Australia, September 2002

Keynote Address:

Strictly Ballroom: The Art of Partnerships in Mental Health Promotion
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I would like to present some comments about the art of partnering, and later to comment on specific partnerships that might make to promote mental health.

Partnerships - it is a fascinating issue – we have tried to take it seriously at VicHealth, because we weren't doing it very well. In the past we thought that because we had the funds then everyone would want to dance to our tune – unfortunately not so.

So we really tried to do it better and I would like to acknowledge the work by Lyn Walker, in particular, who managed to put 100 different groups and people together in the development of our mental health promotion work, and who continues to seek more and better opportunities for common work.

In the last few years much has been discussed and written about partnerships, but as several of the very interesting and realistic papers being presented at the Forum, partnerships are easier said than done. Partnerships are like the boy in the nursery rhyme- *when they are good they are very, very good, and when they are bad they are horrid.*

Partner, partnering, partnership, a new one - partnershipism - have entered the health promotion, public, political and business lexicons – my partner in crime, partnerships weren't meant to be easy, to paraphrase Malcolm Frazer, a partnership in the hand is worth two in the bush; howdy partner, and even football coaches - taking partnerships one week at a time at a time.....

Get them wrong and you can really get confused, for example what do get when you partner the mafia with post-modernism ? An offer you can't understand!

Let's examine some aspects of the art of partnerships.

Partnering is a skill – just like dancing it can be learned, it is not necessarily innate. It doesn't just rely on whether you like each other.

Here are some steps:

1) The first step is to decide is, why bother? What is in it for us?

Be clear about this. Be up front (at least with yourself) about what you see as the upsides of any partnership. And be honest about the potential downsides - loss of autonomy and identity, as in any partnerships you blend into the identity of the partnership, and the opportunity costs (time, resources) of developing and maintaining a partnership.

It is often the lack of acknowledgement of the downsides that brings some partnerships crashing to earth.

2) The second step is to ask what your potential partner or partners (and ask yourself) want out of the partnership? Find out what is in it for them.

The more you can put yourself in the shoes of your PP (potential partner) (In the beginning there was the word, and the word was an acronym). How do they see the world, what outcomes are they dependent on?

In fact if you can even learn their steps that will make you an excellent partner!

It would seem the closer you can align your respective desires the better you will dance. But how often do we try to partner, without really understanding what drives our PPs?

And to do this you have to work out the anatomy of your dancing partner. For example, in any organisation (especially, but not only, in big organisations), the right hand often doesn't know what the left hand is doing, so sometimes you have to help the coordination of the different parts. Or your partner might help you do that in your own organisation.

One of the very good features of this forum is the presence and visibility of consumers and carers, and this serves to reinforce that you should be essential partners, as is the case in other areas of successful promotion, prevention and early intervention. To leave out those who have the most passion, and personal experience in an issue is both unfair and ignores the huge contribution that consumers make. However, like all partners in any deal one doesn't always get everything that one wants.

I'd like to focus the rest of my talk on promoting mental health – and it is here I think we need to make some fundamentally new decisions.

This is the third step

We need to decide with whom should we dance? Should it be only with our long term friends in the mental illness sector or should we be looking for new dance partners as well?

Who are these other groups - in sport and recreation, or business and industry, or urban environment and local government, or the arts, or education - and how do they dance?

Can we look at a few of these other partners?

Education – primary, secondary, tertiary

As I mentioned yesterday their key outcomes are learning outcomes. That's their business – literacy, numeracy. Health is not their priority outcome, it is not what they get funded for, although as parents we are asking schools to solve more and more of society's ills.

So where do we meet? What interests them and what interests us? How about engagement in school? Especially in the middle years. Broadly speaking education knows engagement has a major impact on behavioural and educational outcomes in schools, and health knows it is an important determinant of emotional health. We therefore have a deal.

It doesn't mean that we will instantly dance like Paul Mercurio or Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers – but it's a good start to understanding each other.

Sport and recreation

Sports and recreation clubs want participants. And again we know that a valued social role, participation, belonging is a great promoter of mental health. So we have another deal. As I mentioned at the opening, we would be silly to miss out the chances that the increasing focus on physical activity for obesity prevention can have in promoting mental health.

In addition, the appeal and pervasiveness of sport in Australia can be very important in helping to shape positive (and negative) community opinion. Apart from humanitarian principles, it is for mental health reasons I am a big fan of anti-discrimination/racial vilification legislation. But when Spider Everit, the St Kilda ruckman got rubbed out for four weeks for sledging an Aboriginal player it entered the consciousness of a lot more people than the latest EOC ruling.

If you aren't too sure about the mentally health promoting role that good sporting and recreation can play in our lives watch what happens to people in country towns when they lose their football and netball club, or their cricket club, or their swimming pool closes. Look at the Panton Hills Cricket Club, which changed, with the help of the Australian Drug Foundation's Good Sports project, from having a boys only, boozy club culture, with only two teams, to a family-friendly, inclusive and welcoming culture with five junior teams, five senior teams and one veteran's team.

Incidentally, one of the major threats to our collective mental health, in my opinion is the public liability insurance crisis. And it is a crisis. Why? Because the deeper it impacts on local clubs, theatre groups, on community gatherings and even street Christmas parties the more it will stop us connecting to each other. And even if public liability insurance is a problem of say, only two or three years, the connections it destroys may take another ten years to re-create!

Lets now look at the arts

The American psychologist and philosopher William James is reported to have said. *I don't sing because I'm happy: I'm happy because I sing.*

A large 15 year Swedish study of over 10,000 people showed the mental and physical health promoting capacity of the Arts – reading a book, attending a cultural event, and singing in a choir were all seen to have significant associations with good mental health.

Ask the women in Somebody's Theatre Company, that arose out of the women's prison, or the performers in the Footscray Women's Circus, or the so-called 'at risk' young people in the Artful dodgers Studio, or in the BigHart Good Nights Street Project. The arts can help to institutionalise our support for our kids, rather than institutionalise the kids.

Business and Industry

One of the most mentally health promoting assets that one can have is a good job.

Look at the Whitelion program in Juvenile Justice - it is a visiting, mentoring and employment program for young offenders, most of whom have major mental health and drug addiction problems.

They started with high profile AFL footballers, and used their allure if you like to work with and invite business in. They found out what they needed from business, and they found out what business wanted - and they worked out how to maintain the partnership.

The strength of this common purpose was shown recently in a lunch with our Minister of Community Services. The aim was to encourage the minister and the department to provide ongoing support for this excellent public-private partnership. It was when the KFC manager, a big burly New Zealander got up to speak – he explained how beneficial it was for his employees, let alone for the kids in juvenile justice system. He was close to tears because it had really given his organisation a meaningful way to contribute to young people.

Similarly the Lead On Project in Bendigo has worked out how to match the demand of young people for meaningful projects with the supply of good will and good projects from local business and industry.

Lets look at yet another dance partner – the Urban environment

Why you might ask?

Let men tell you the story of three streets in San Francisco. These streets all in the same part of San Francisco were studied to look at the traffic passing and the level of connectedness and safety as perceived by the residents. One (heavy street) street had approx 16,000 cars per day, one 8,000 per day and one (light street) had 2,000 per day. Those living on light street have three times as many friends among their neighbours as those on heavy street. Light street was perceived to be friendly and safe for kids, whereas on heavy street residents kept to themselves and there was little sense of community.

So how we design out environments can have a very important impact on our mental health, physical health and sense of safety. Having shops within walking distance probably does a lot more than encourage physical exercise – by giving us the opportunity to engage with our neighbours, and to belong. Cars provide far fewer opportunities to interact with each other – other than in negative ways – road rage for example – by the way has anyone seen footpath rage?

Similarly local government plays a crucial role in providing amenities for us to connect locally, to engage, to resolve disputes, to exercise and so on.

And there are many other partners – those working in crime prevention, alcohol and drugs, early drop out from school, HIV/STD prevention, and road trauma, to name but a few where the determinants we are working on to promote mental health are very similar to the determinants they are working on.

So the choice of dance partners is huge – you have to choose what dance – two for a tango or thirty for a boot-scoot!

Now back to the reality of the dance?

What do we do when they keep stepping on our toes? Or when we keep kicking them in the shins?

I think this is when it comes back to the basics of any partnership, of any relationship. Mutual respect, a willingness to seek to understand before we seek to be understood, the willingness to keep practicing, and a preparedness to give, to lose a little to gain a lot. The irony is that we need good mental health to promote mental health – so the essential component in successful partnering starts with our own mental, emotional and spiritual health.

Thanks for the opportunity to dance.

And how do we behave when we are dancing – what are the dance floor rules?