


# Multiple disciplines in mental healthcare - Paulann Grech

Health

Opinion

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Interdisciplinarity synthesises and harmonises the relationship between the different professionals.  
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It is no secret that, when mental illness strikes, it has a tendency to rock the boat. It usually wreaks havoc in a person's life due to its effect on most of the important areas of daily living. While this rings true for any illness, be it mental or physical, sufferers of mental health problems seem to be particularly prone to having their life turned upside down.

This is usually more pronounced in mental illnesses of a moderate-severe nature

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often compounded by the 'lack of tangible proof' that a broken limb or any other physical malaise may present with. Consequently, this tends to make it harder to generate compassion from others towards the sufferer since it can be seen as akin to trying to convince someone to believe in ghosts which, as we know, have a similar tendency to lack physical appearance and, hence, proof.

This multifaceted effect of mental illness is the prime reason why several professions need to be involved in the recovery journey. Nowadays, it is glaringly obvious that no one professional can be skilled enough or time manage effectively enough to be able to singularly cater for all the needs that a person with mental illness may have.

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However, this was not always the case, since, traditionally, the so-called 'medical model' allowed for sole focus on the alleviation or suppression of the acute symptoms of mental illness with little emphasis on how the person's overall quality of life can be sustained or improved. Since this is usually limited treatment to a handful of drugs, it also implied that only medical doctors needed to be involved in the treatment of mental health problems.

As the understanding of such ailments evolved, so did the rise of other professions that were gradually deemed vital in terms of the input they could offer to the care package. Hence, we saw the introduction of mental health care offered by multiple disciplines.

While, in theory, this sounds fantastic, one must be aware of certain factors.

For starters, it is important to realise not everyone has the necessary qualifications to offer a therapeutic service.

While every profession has its wannabe clan, mental health seems to have a particular knack for attracting well-meaning people who believe that they are born with ready-made skills to offer therapeutic services to the world.

It is true that some of the skills or, rather, characteristics that are needed in this area are inherent ones. Yet, it is equally important to receive proper training to become acquainted to and skilled in interventions that are known to be effective as opposed to others that can actually make a sufferer feel worse. Hence, while the range of therapeutic services in mental health is vast, it is good to keep in mind that not all training courses are equal.

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Thus, one cannot really compare a three-hour course to a three- or four-year course pursued through a reputable institute or university. On similar lines, while a business card may look impressive and professional, it could be generated online in a couple of minutes.

Bottom line: do not be duped by appearances. A proper and robust qualification that is commonly accompanied by registration with the appropriate council is crucial when it comes to trusting a professional to take care of your mental health.

In mental healthcare, various professionals originating from multiple disciplines are often grouped together to offer a service as a team. This holds the promise of a synergistic effort and effective skills mix. However, it is not always easy for different professionals to offer their specific expertise while having a good enough collaboration with each other to ensure that all the needs that a care receiver may have are collectively met.

Simultaneously, they must also ensure that no gaps are left unaddressed. This must be achieved during a process that involves not only different professions but also various personalities working closely and smoothly together while paying attention to avoid treading on others' toes and risking the triggering of a professional war. It's interesting and challenging at the best of times, and extremely tricky at others.

As a reflection of this, a number of models and terms have evolved over the years in an attempt to shed light on how different professions and personalities are supposed to offer care together in an effective and efficient way. One of the commonly discussed examples

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care together in an effective and efficient way. One of the commonly discussed explanatory frameworks is that which distinguishes between multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary teamwork.

Simply put, multidisciplinary can be likened to the different ingredients that are needed to make a cake. While each ingredient has its specific contribution to the recipe, it stays within its boundaries on the shelf beside the other ingredients.

This is similar to the role of each professional as a standalone individual within a multidisciplinary team.

On the other hand, interdisciplinarity synthesises and harmonises the relationship between the different professionals – the same as what happens when all the cake ingredients are placed into a food mixer and interact to start forming a coherent whole.

Finally, for transdisciplinarity to take place, professionals have to transcend their natural boundaries and interact smoothly to offer a comprehensive service. In terms of cake baking, this is similar to what happens when, after mixing, the ingredients are baked and the outcome is a whole, solid cake with each processed ingredient discretely contributing to the overall taste and structure.

While transdisciplinary teamwork is the ultimate destination, it is also the hardest to achieve. This is due primarily to the requirement for excellent collaboration, communication and flexibility between the professionals as well as the need to avoid team dominance by any one particular profession.

Ideally, mental health professionals familiarise themselves with transdisciplinary teamwork not only while on the job but also during educational endeavours. This may facilitate the application of such a *modus operandi* to the clinical area.

To this extent, the Faculty of Health Sciences, Faculty for Social Well-being and Faculty of Medicine and Surgery are offering a new course, namely an MSc in Mental Health Studies. This is delivered by professionals to professionals from various disciplines.

Applications are open. For further information, visit:

<https://www.um.edu.mt/courses/overview/PMSCMNSPET9-2019-0-0> or send an e-mail to [paulann.grech@um.edu.mt](mailto:paulann.grech@um.edu.mt).

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