

Event Brief

Webinar:

“Unscripted” – When new understandings are an unexpected outcome

May 18, 2022

Purpose

Mental health promotion can be messy! Even the best articulated participant recruitment strategies, project implementation plans, data collection procedures, and evaluation protocols do not always unfold according to plan. What do we do when new insights lie outside of the margins of our well-conceived plans? This webinar explored the wonder and beauty of embracing those unexpected moments and missteps as opportunities to be flexible and adaptable while gaining new insights and knowledge.

Participants

This webinar was attended by 17 MHP-IF project team members and six Hub Secretariat members.

Meeting structure

- After brief opening remarks, the webinar began with introductions to the Hub’s new Scientific Co-Directors, Drs. Alice Schmidt Hanbidge and Colleen McMillan.
- Alice and Colleen each shared their own ‘wayward’ stories of adapting project activities and data collection to emerging circumstances and to meet the needs of participants.
- Small groups provided the opportunity for project team members to share and explore their experiences of the unexpected and what was learned as a result.
- A brief return to plenary included the highlights of small group discussions and a look forward to upcoming Hub activities.

What did we learn?

Participants shared a variety of examples of when they needed to be flexible and adaptable. They also shared the new learnings and unexpected successes that resulted. Their stories reinforced many important concepts relevant to the implementation of mental health promotion projects.

- Being sensitive to culture sometimes means adapting data collection methods (e.g., adjusting a body mapping exercise).

- Project participants often know best what will meet their needs and sometimes we must be open to changes in even highly structured programs (e.g., youth expanding curriculum and activities leading to increased reach and impact).
- Greater reciprocity in relationships enhances outcomes. There is a transfer of trust when participants shape activities, data collection and project directions (e.g., pandemic conditions leading to community-based partners taking greater ownership of implementation and evaluation activities).
- Relationship and trust building within communities leads to greater reach and impact (e.g., word-of-mouth recruitment more effective than diversified marketing streams).
- Sometimes 'problems' lead to unexpected opportunities (e.g., an office too small to store data maps leading to opportunities for wider engagement and secondary data collection).
- Problems can also lead to innovation (e.g., pandemic restrictions leading to training community-members in data entry enhancing data ownership; learning to collect consent and conduct observations virtually).
- It is okay to 'learn as we go', experiment with new methods and benefit from tight feedback loops (e.g., trying and giving up on text messages to parents as a pandemic adaptation).
- Many, many aspects of implementation are outside of the control of the project team (e.g., an early rainy season, a pandemic and related public health measures, changes in political landscape/election calls).
- Responding to the unexpected has practical implications for project plans and budgets (e.g., acquiring bigger screens for virtual observations, acquiring new software and related training).
- Changes in context, alongside rigorous methodology, can provide opportunities for natural experiments (e.g., pre-pandemic measures compared to mid-pandemic measures resulting in opportunity to publish objective portrait of impacts on youth mental health).

As well as highlighting the realities of working in complex environments, project-to-project sharing reinforced the importance of sharing operational details. Small group sharing allowed participants to seek clarification and hear fuller descriptions of situations and solutions. This reminds us that fulsome stories are powerful communication and learning tools.

How will learnings from this event be used?

- A new [blog post](#) on the KDE Hub website is informed by the webinar. It includes additional resources related to this topic.
- The Hub will continue to host opportunities for project-to-project sharing.

