Mental Health Trialogue
Network Ireland
What is Trialogue?

Trialogue is a conversation between three or more people or groups using a form of open communication known as Open Dialogue. The Trialogue uses open dialogue as a means to allow everyone to participate in the conversation. Open Dialogue enables the creation of a common language and a mutual understanding around the given topic. There is no exclusivity of expert knowledge or power, with the diverse experiences and expressions carrying equal weight. The combined expertise is taken on board by all in the Trialogue and together they create a shared reality that is mutually acceptable and accessible to all.

Mental Health Trialogue Meetings?

A Mental Health Trialogue Meeting is a community forum where everyone with an interest in mental health participates in an open dialogue. Trialogue meetings are welcoming and inclusive of all community members, including mental health service users, carers, families friends, professionals and anyone with an interest in mental health in the community. They can help communities to change the perception that only those who work in the field of mental health are the experts in mental health. Mental health is everyone’s business, regardless of their background and experience.

A ‘Trialogue’ group takes place in a neutral location where communities can gather to develop their understanding of mental health issues, the challenges of maintaining mental health and to transform thinking on developing better services and healthy communities.
What happens in a Mental Health Trialogue Meeting?

A Trialogue meeting involves the encounter of at least the three main groups (service users, family members/friends of service users & mental health service providers) under special conditions on an equal footing in an open conversation.

The combination of knowledge and expertise provides a unique wealth of collective knowledge that individuals or people from different perspectives would not otherwise be exposed to.

This empowers people in how they relate to challenges and circumstances of their involvement with mental health issues. The Trialogue discussions help people to develop skills that allow them to contribute to and to tap into this knowledge pool and experience. It can transform your own experience, and provide back up for utilising new knowledge in everyday life towards recovery, caring for a family member or friend, interacting with neighbours or providing professional care to people with mental health problems.

People who have participated in Trialogue Meetings have reported diverse experiences:

- That the Trialogue meetings are very different from other representative meetings, offering a new, enlivening, accepting, comfortable experience with a sense of openness and freedom

- You gain not only knowledge and awareness of new expansive knowledge; you become aware of the capacity of community to respond to the challenges brought about by mental health problems for people

- There is a renewed energy, motivation and stimulation bringing about a sense of being more alive, empowered; and with an increase in awareness, acceptance and tolerance of diversity

- It is a rich learning experience, an education of each other that enhances how they comprehend others and their own experiences

- Where you develop communication skills that improve sense of self and a confidence and allow you to share your own experiences and enhance how you connect with others

- It can change the way you think about mental health and mental distress; increasing your understanding, being more informed of how people cope and manage mental health problems, more aware of what is positive and lacking in mental health service provision, increasing awareness of the experience of stigma and discrimination in communities, and the responsibility for promoting mental health and managing mental health problems in communities
Setting up Trialogue Meetings

- A core group of people equally representative of service users, family members/carers and service providers will agree that there is desire and/or need to set up Trialogue Meetings in their community and are committed to facilitating this.

- Identify a neutral cheap or free venue, e.g. community centre, local authority building or parish centre that is accessible to a wide section of the community.

- Advertise the first meeting using flyers, local radio, and local newspaper and existing networks/groups for the main groups, social network sites, and word of mouth, etc.

- Book the venue and where affordable and/or if by choice arrange basic refreshments.

- If there is a cost make people aware in advance in advertisements that a donation will be welcomed to cover these.

Ground Rules

- Topics would normally be decided by the participants on the evening of meeting or possibly in the previous meeting so that prospective participants know in advance.

- Generally Trialogue Meetings take place in a circular gathering with no barriers in between participants. This provides a neutral open space for conversation.

- Where possible ‘leave your hat at the door’. One of the frequently voiced empowering things for people in Trialogue Meetings is to be able to speak their mind without feeling restrained by their day to day responsibilities. For example, a carer normally focused on the needs of their family member may speak out on behalf of themselves; a service user normally intent on trying to get through the day may want to seriously question the choice of care available to them; and the mental health professional may wish to voice their frustration with daily organisational and/or legal restraint on their ability to provide the care they know is good.
Everyone in the meeting is understood to be bringing their own expertise to the conversation so that all can gain from each other.

People leave their mobile phones off or on silent.

The right to anonymity is important. People are not asked to say who they are or where they come from, which is quite different from many other groups.

Everyone has the right to speak or not to speak.

One person speaks at a time with no one speaking over another.

Every ones opinion and comments are both respectful and respected.

Participants should ensure that they feel personally safe and comfortable in the group.

Although there is no onus on people not to talk about the Trialogue experience and things that come up at meetings, it is expected that outside of meetings people respect what people said and do not personalise comments.

Usually Meetings last between an hour and a half to two hours with some informal chat before and after the meeting. Some people have a refreshment break half way through or at the end.

Facilitation or Moderation of Trialogue Meetings

Just like ground rules, the role of facilitation or moderation in meetings or groups depends on the purpose of them. For Trialogue Meetings the role is kept very simple on the basis that any participant can moderate a meeting, and in Trialogue the intent is not to manage or guide the conversation according to any agenda other than the open conversation about an agreed topic. It is useful to have some one who is happy to co-facilitate, particularly if the group is large.

The group will usually agree a facilitator at the beginning of each meeting or in some cases they agree that one or two will take on this role for a designated period of time. Alternatively the group may just agree to have a rotating facilitator from meeting to meeting.

The principal role of the facilitator or moderator is to ensure that the ground rules are respected and that the meeting starts and finishes on time. The group themselves will usually ensure that this will happen and may only need a gentle reminder at times.

Ensuring that the ground rules are respected may entail a number of actions by the facilitator during a meeting. For example, she/he:

- Will observe for indications (sometimes a nod or a hand raised) that someone wants to speak and bring them in and encourage turn taking
- May encourage responses to comments made
- May seek clarification or try to summarise (in their view) what has been said so far
- May signify that one person or conversation piece is monopolising the overall conversation
- Will ensure that everyone has the opportunity to speak by asking at various times (particularly towards the end of meeting) if anyone who has not spoken yet would like to do so
- Trialogue Meetings can be very energetic and enthusiastic conversations and at times it is different to stick to the agreed topic. The facilitator will also remind the group of the topic if this occurs and ask if they wish to refocus on it.
Visit: www.trialogue.co for more information and details on Trialogue Meetings
Or contact Liam Mac Gabhann at Tel: 01 700 8805 & Email: liam.macgabhann@dcu.ie
and Paddy Mc Gowan at Tel: 017008926 & Email: patrick.mcgowan@dcu.ie
Copyright © Mental Health Trialogue Network Ireland

Supported by
the GENIO Trust: