

FACT SHEET

Partnerships with purpose

Respectful partnerships are vital in life, business ... and research. By sharing knowledge and expertise in pursuit of common goals we can have significant impact.

At Manna Institute, our researchers are partnering with service organisations, communities and individuals with valuable personal experience to conduct mental health research that matters. Research underpinned by respectful relationships and a spirit of goodwill.

So what constitutes a good partnership? And how do you maintain one?

Manna partners Dr Anna Brooks and Niall Mulligan, from the Lifeline Research Office and Lifeline Direct, Everymind Director Dr Jaelea Skehan and Manna Chief Investigator Russell Roberts, from Charles Sturt University, share their collective wisdom.

Building relationships

A good research partnership, like any other partnership, is founded on trust, empathy and reciprocity.

It's vital to understand the people and organisations you are partnering with and how the research will potentially benefit them. What are their motivations for supporting the research? And how can that inform the research?

"As service providers, we are laser-focused on delivering important and often life-saving services to the community and that is usually done on the smell of an oily rag," Anna says. "Research projects can be seen as a bit of a nuisance, that distracts us from core business."

So ask yourself, what's in the project for *all* parties involved?

"It's important to understand the interests of your partners and what they might reasonably expect to gain from interacting with a researcher," Niall says. "Only by being mindful of the end users can you establish mutually beneficial relationships."

That starts in the planning phase, with discussions about the research protocols, ethics, timeframes and sharing of results. Ideally, research questions should be developed in collaboration with all partners. Also negotiate:

- Who will be your point of contact and how they will be reimbursed (consider an FTE in the grant application);
- How the partners will be involved in the research;
- How and when preliminary results will be shared; and
- How final outcomes may be translated into practice.

Maintaining communication

Keeping partners well informed throughout the research project is critical.

Enlist your point of contact in managing expectations within the partner organisation. That individual should be empowered to identify issues that arise and to test emerging conclusions against real-world experiences.

Few research partners have time to wait for results to be published years later; they are likely to want to introduce improvements immediately based on progressive research findings. Negotiate ways this can happen.

“Part of relationship building is also being able to solve problems together,” says Anna. “So when things inevitably go wrong, it’s super important to be frank about it and prepared to adjust to keep the project moving. These discussions need to be constructive, so that everyone feels supported.”

Building steps or stages into the research schedule can be a helpful way of providing feedback and regular opportunities for input. “Take any chance to ask ‘How am I going so far?’,” says Russell.

Maximising the value of research

Investing in relationships is not only important for the health of a research project, but also for the health and wellbeing of its partners.

“Don’t take the partnership for granted; build it and nurture it,” Jaelea says. “Every partner has their own connections and networks they can introduce you to, which can be really important to the delivery and translation of the research. Who knows what opportunities might arise in the future?”

Consider maintaining partnerships beyond the research project. Options could include sitting on your partner’s board,

applying your expertise in another project, delivering education, or working on a pro bono basis.

Every partnership thrives when contributions are acknowledged. “Ensure, at the end of any research project, that there is tangible recognition for the people who have participated,” Russell says, “but, above all else, deliver on what you promised.”

When partnerships work well, it feels like everyone wins. And, in the case of research, effective partnerships boost our potential to make powerful, practical contributions.

