

Healing fostered by research

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Goals of the research

This health research began within a provincial correctional centre for women, with a vision to engage women in their own recovery and to help women enhance their health and well-being.

Building a team

For this participatory research, we developed an interdisciplinary, prison community-based research team composed of academic researchers, contractors, women in the provincial correctional system (peer researchers), and health policy makers.

Engaging the women in the research process offered a win-win situation for everyone.¹ This methodology is not always easy, but it often creates opportunities for change in all those involved.

Engaging participants in research

Research is a systematic inquiry aimed at discovering and interpreting new knowledge.² The amount of distrust in some communities makes research about issues that are relevant and important to those in the communities essential. The research team is using participatory methods integrated with action-oriented research and transformative learning.²⁻⁶ This project received approval from a local university's Behavioural Research Ethics Board before commencement.

The research began with interviews and focus groups with incarcerated women, correctional officers, and nurses who worked within the correctional centre. Discussions focused on determining what health issues were considered important by the women and on exploring how to facilitate the project accordingly.

In October 2005, the research team hosted a "Face-to-Face Forum" at the correctional centre that was open to all interested women in the prison community, correctional staff, and academic researchers. The forum was pivotal for building relationships, defining values, and exploring how the research team would work together, as well as for learning how best to integrate participatory methods and action-oriented research with transformative learning. During the forum, through the use of participatory analysis,⁷ numerous health issues were

identified as strategic areas requiring action by all the people involved.

As the project progressed, several incarcerated women sought opportunities to participate in the research process and became engaged in typing up transcripts and developing logic models, survey tools, and presentations. As a result, research became a "work placement" within the correctional centre.

Transformative learning

The study led to defining healing as a continuum that builds on personal healing, is influenced by community supports and the environment, and affects all women in the correctional centre. Healing occurs in a safe place using skills such as critical thinking, dialogue, and praxis. One woman described health and healing as "looking beyond ourselves to see what others are contributing to the community as a whole." Another woman shared her insight into how healing happens and what the women need to heal:

Healing changes when individuals quit seeing the fence—working on personal healing so that they become ready to see the world for what it has to offer. Keeping women safe to undertake the healing that they require individually and as a community is also important.

The process of engaging in dialogue through participatory research also resulted in improving women's health and increasing a sense of empowerment in the correctional centre. For example, one woman reflected on how the research affected women in the correctional centre and stated:

Women inmates are encouraged to break the silence about abuse, respect what is being said, break the "prison code" because it keeps women in the cycle of abuse of the system, community, individuals, and self-abuse. It then becomes important and critical for us to speak out [empowerment].

Another woman hoped that the experience in the correctional centre would contribute to change in other prisons,

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saying “What a feeling it is to be and feel empowered. It was hoped that this research project would help not only our prison but others as well to be managed with a healing hand and not an iron fist.”⁸ One woman also thought that the study contributed to celebrating the unique strengths and characteristics of the correctional centre:

This institution is like no other in that it is more geared to women’s recovery and well-being; [for example], we have a Rec Therapist, we have babies and moms, microphones and recording devices, 15 jobs with the research team, hip-hop, Eagle Hut, drummers with Women’s Warrior Song, self-learning resulting in PowerPoint presentations shared with the entire community—a day full of learning, emotion, and gratitude.⁹

Why research with communities is important

Developing an interdisciplinary, community-based research team in a correctional centre led to meaningful change for the women that resulted in healing as well as individual and community empowerment. The supportive environment created by this community-based participatory research project enhanced health and health practices within the correctional centre and in the lives of many women following release.

This research project continues to influence individuals and communities within and outside of the correctional system. This study brought people together in such a way that learning and working together was possible. Thus, the silence traditionally held by women within the correctional system around many health-related issues was broken. The project resulted in several journal articles within and outside the correctional system. In addition to this, the research team has been successful in securing funding to continue the project; thus, women following

release are continuing this research endeavour as peer researchers in the communities in which they reside. 🌿

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Competing interests

None declared

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