

Employ your Mind

Summary report on the Australian research pilot, 2017



A partnership between WISE Employment, Fife Employment Access Trust (FEAT), and St Vincent's Mental Health piloted FEAT's vocational rehabilitation program for people with severe mental illness – Employ Your Mind – in 2017. The program demonstrated significant improvements in cognitive functioning and vocational confidence of a sample of Australians severely affected by mental illness.

Background

Employment is a key component of social and economic inclusion. Having a job, financial security and social connection are the three top goals of Australians living with a severe mental illness.¹ Assisting someone to gain and maintain employment addresses all three but despite this, the unemployment rate for this population is unacceptably high. In 2015, only 25% of people aged 15 to 64 years with a severe mental illness resulting in psychosocial disability were employed, compared with 78.8% of people without a disability.²

The reasons for this are varied and include a lack of understanding about mental illness, the changing nature and demands of the workplace, lack of appropriate workplace supports and not least, the nature of severe mental illness and associated psychosocial disability.

Mental illnesses are complex conditions. The levels of impairment and disability can fluctuate as a result of the episodic nature of the illness, changes to medication and treatment, the varying levels of support available, environmental stressors, individual coping strategies and varying levels of need. A significant challenge for many people with conditions such as schizophrenia is the impact of associated cognitive impairments, which affect memory, concentration, planning and problem-solving.

Whilst medication addresses the more overt symptoms of psychotic illness (such as hallucinations and delusions) it is not so effective at addressing the cognitive impairments that affect the person's thinking and communication skills, key requirements for many roles in today's workplaces. The side-effects of the medication can add further challenges in terms of work-readiness skills. The above, combined with the limited range of effective support options available, result in many people losing confidence and hope of achieving employment, contributing to the poor outcomes for this group.

Given the role employment plays in recovery, it is critical that there are interventions and supports available that address these barriers and genuinely assist people with mental illness to achieve their vocational goals.

The program

In 2016 WISE Employment and St Vincent's Mental Health developed a partnership with Fife Employment Access Trust (FEAT) in Scotland, to pilot 'Employ Your Mind' an innovative vocational rehabilitation program developed by FEAT for people with severe and persistent mental illness.

Employ Your Mind (EYM) uses a combination of strategies, including cognitive remediation therapy (CRT), which incorporates a computer based program – Scientific Brain Training Pro – with bridging sessions, a focus on social cognition and group reflection, goal-setting to help participants prepare for work, individual project work,

¹ Morgan et al (2012). *People Living with Psychotic Illness 2010: Report on the second Australian national survey*. Commonwealth of Australia

² Australian Bureau of Statistics (2017). *Disability, ageing and carers, Australia: Summary of findings, 2015*, cat. no. 4430.0, ABS, Canberra.

and a work-orientation phase. The program was designed to be highly responsive to the individual, allowing participants to engage at their own pace and to reconnect as and when required. It is delivered in four six-week phases over 7 months, and helps to build a sense of direction, confidence, routine, and improved communication and cognitive functioning skills. Completion of each phase is celebrated and the final phase includes a work-orientation component of four hours per week for four weeks. A key feature of EYM is the embedding of occupational therapists in the program, who work with the Learning Coaches (community mental health workers) and oversee the subjective and objective assessments which are completed in the first and last phases to measure progress.

WISE Employment coordinated the delivery of the pilot program and St Vincent’s Mental Health coordinated the evaluation.

Partners

Prahran Mission (Uniting), Eastern Access Community Health (EACH) and the Mountain District Learning Centre. WISE Employment’s Personal Helpers and Mentors team and social enterprise Cleanforce also participated in the pilot.

Results

Results for change in cognitive function were positive and statistically significant across three measures:

- ARCS (Audio Recorded Cognitive Screen) – A measure of a number of cognitive domains including executive function/attention, fluency, language, visuospatial and memory (including immediate recall, delayed recall and recognition).³
- SATS (Self-Assessment of Thinking Skills) – An informal questionnaire providing a subjective view of thinking skills and cognition.⁴
- WSAS (Work and Social Adjustment Scale) – A validated measure of impaired functioning, drawing on subjective perspective.⁵

The above measures demonstrated objective improvement in specific cognitive functioning skills and participants’ subjective perception of the positive impact of EYM on their everyday functioning, including work-related activities.

Cognitive assessment results

Measure	Pre-intervention value	Post-intervention value	t value	p value
ARCS	67.14	79.36	t (21) = - 4.25	<.001
SATS	14.14	11.32	t (21) = - 4.11	.001
WSAS	17.91	11.86	t (21) = 3.83	.001

Participants’ Outcomes

All participants undertook personal projects requiring concentration, planning, and communication skills, which led on to the work-orientation placements. One participant completed a project on ‘brain food’, enrolled in a

³ Cognition Health (2012). ARCS: Audio recorded cognitive screen. *Newcastle Innovation*. Available at cognitionhealth.com (accessed 21 February 2018)

⁴ Medalia et al (2009). *Cognitive remediation for psychological disorders: Therapist’s guide*. Oxford University Press.

⁵ Mundt, J., Marks, I., Shear, M., & Greist, J. (2002). The Work and Social Adjustment Scale: A simple measure of impairment in functioning. *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 180(5), 461-464. doi:10.1192/bjp.180.5.461

hospitality course, completed his work orientation at a café, and is now employed there on an ongoing basis. Another participant, interested in IT, did his project on mentoring, and his work placement in a disability employment service researching the role of mental health peer support workers. He is now completing a related vocational certificate.

Sample feedback from students:

'It gives you a challenge so you can think and concentrate'

'I learned how to initiate conversations respectfully'

'I enjoy making my memory work better'

'Thanks for the program; I have a renewed view of my skills and abilities'

'I am able to see my strengths as well as learn something new every time'

'I enjoyed what EYM has revealed and the insight into myself it has brought about.'

'I have found myself being more at ease within myself . . . and obviously showing up differently within in my community, as many people have engaged me in conversation' "What have you done? You're different somehow," is a comment I have heard many times recently.'

Conclusions

The objective and subjective measures used in the Employ Your Mind pilot program demonstrate successful improvement in the cognitive performance and vocational confidence of a sample of Australians severely affected by mental illness, and translation into everyday living and employment-related skills. The pilot program was highly popular with participants who reported feeling significantly better at managing their everyday lives and communicating with other people. The support staff also appreciated having a structured, focused intervention to deliver to their clients and particularly valued the mentoring from EYM occupational therapists throughout the program.

Funding

The Australian Employ Your Mind pilot program was generously supported by the William Buckland Foundation and WISE Employment.

Acknowledgments

WISE Employment gratefully acknowledges the generous contribution and support from Fife Employment Access Trust, (FEAT), Scientific Brain Training Pro, the participation of staff and clients at Prahran Mission (Uniting), Eastern Access Community Health (EACH), the Mountain District Learning Centre, WISE Employment PHaMs and Cleanforce; and research partner, St Vincent's Mental Health.

