

The Rehabilitation Effectiveness for Activities for Life (REAL) study: a national programme of research into NHS inpatient mental health rehabilitation services across England

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Plain English summary

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Plain English summary

Mental health rehabilitation services work with people with severe and complex mental health problems: a 'low-volume, high-needs' group. Our research programme involved a national survey of NHS inpatient mental health rehabilitation services, the development of a staff training programme to help staff engage service users in activities, a trial to assess the effectiveness of the training programme and a longitudinal study to investigate aspects of the service and service user characteristics associated with better outcomes.

Almost all NHS trusts across England had inpatient mental health rehabilitation units, and 133 took part in our survey. Most were community based, and they provided an average of 14 beds and had an average length of stay of 18 months. Most service users had a diagnosis of psychosis and many had a history of self-neglect. Higher-quality services promoted service users' independence and satisfaction with care.

Our staff training programme did not improve service users' engagement in activities, possibly because staff stopped using the techniques and skills learnt after the training team left. However, over half of the service users we followed in our longitudinal study were discharged successfully to the community over 12 months. This was more likely for people who were more active and had better social skills, and in units that adopted a 'recovery orientation'. A relatively small investment (£67 per service user per month) was required to achieve the improvements in everyday function we found.

Our findings support ongoing investment and further research into NHS mental health rehabilitation services to ensure that people with complex needs are successfully supported in their recovery.

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