

Subjective experience on group activities of patients admitted in a psychiatric facility during the COVID-19 epidemic: “the Santi’s Magazine”

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SUMMARY

Objectives

Italy is one of the most affected countries in the world during the COVID-19 pandemic. The recurring waves of the epidemic largely compromised routine activities of the Italian Departments of Mental Health, significantly reducing outpatient and day service activities. Psychiatric facility and hospital treatments have also been maintained, albeit widely remodeled and conditioned by the fear of contagion. The aim of this paper was to report the subjective experiences on group activities offered in an Italian psychiatric facility for intensive interventions (the Santi Center) during the second wave of the pandemic in the fall of 2020.

Methods

The format of these group activities included weekly face-to-face meetings using supportive, psychoeducational, motor and relaxing techniques, all conducted by mental health professionals. Here we reported the participants’ subjective experiences written during the two months of these meetings, all of which merged into the special 2020 Christmas edition of the Santi’s magazine. Results

All participants (8 out of 12 inpatients hospitalized in the facility at that time) were affected by psychotic disorders. Patients’ experiences on group activities were uniformly positive. In this paper we reported the most significant passages.

Conclusions

Inpatients with psychotic disorder found our group activities very beneficial. Our real-world experience is a useful witness to contrast the general paralysis of mental healthcare interventions, which too much often affected Italian mental healthcare services during the pandemic. Moreover, it advances our understanding of the usefulness of group activities for increasing patient’s resilience also in an epidemic era and in a forced social isolation.

Key words: group therapy, psychiatric patients, rehabilitation, psychiatric facility, COVID-19

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Introduction

About 5 million affected cases and 133.000 deaths from the COVID-19 epidemic lead Italy to be considered as one of the most affected countries in Europe and in the world to date ¹. Starting from 21th February 2020 (key date for “Patient zero” identification in Italy), the recurring waves of the pandemic widely compromised routine activities of the Italian Departments of Mental Health, traditionally organized according to a community-based model of care ². About this, physical and interpersonal distancing specifi-

cally affected outpatient and day service interventions, concomitantly increasing video conference-based visits and phone calls ³. However, facility and hospital treatments have also been offered, albeit largely remodeled and conditioned by the fear of contagion ⁴.

Despite this, here we reported the *subjective experiences* on group activities offered in an Italian psychiatric facility for intensive interventions (“the Santi Center”) during the second wave of the epidemic in the fall of 2020 (exactly from 15th October to 30th November 2020), using words and perspectives of the hospitalized patients, overall described in the special 2020 Christmas edition of the “Santi’s Magazine”.

Methods

The *Santi Center* is a historical residential facility of the Parma Department of Mental Health, in which intervention setting is best for individuals who require intensive treatment and regular monitoring. Intervention plans are comprehensive and individualized, including both individual and group therapy ⁵.

The format of our *group activities* included weekly face-to-face meetings using supportive, psychoeducational, motor and relaxing techniques, all conducted by mental healthcare professionals (i.e. educators, nurses, psychologists and psychiatrists). Each session (lasted approximately 60 minutes) was focused on specific topic related to the group’s needs, such as improving knowledge about mental illness and coping with symptoms and negative affect, increasing understanding about psychotropic medication and their side effects, improving interpersonal skills and the management of negative emotions (e.g. anger, anxiety and sadness, including fear of contagion and social isolation), better counteracting social and internal stigma, promoting physical activity and learning simple techniques to relax. These meetings had the beneficial effect of bringing together people with similar experiential conditions, similar worries, feelings and everyday problems (including social distancing due to the COVID-19 epidemic) under the guidance of a mental healthcare professional. All participants and group leaders had previously completed the anti COVID-19 vaccination course and must have had a negative result of nasopharyngeal molecular swab immediately prior to the current hospitalization. Group sessions were held in a meeting room of large size such as to allow a right distance of the participants (at least two meters from each other), in any case all wearing a FFP2 mask.

In this respect, all *group participants* (8 out of 12 inpatients hospitalized in the Santi center at that time) were diagnosed by relatively stabilized psychotic disorders (3 with schizophrenia, 3 with schizoaffective disorder and 2 with bipolar I disorder with psychotic symptoms)

in accordance with the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of mental disorders, IV Edition, Text Revised (DSM-IV-TR) ⁶. The major psychiatric diagnoses were made using the Structured Clinical Interview for DSM-IV-TR axis I disorders (SCID-I) ⁷. All group members gave their written informed consent to anonymously publish their personal perspectives on the Santi Center group activities included in special 2020 Christmas Edition of the “Santi Magazine”. Local relevant ethical approval was obtained (AVEN Ethics Committee protocol n. 36102/2019). The current paper has also been written in accordance with the principles of the 1983 Declaration of Helsinki and its later amendments.

Results

Patients’ perspectives

Participants’ perspectives on group activities offered at the Santi Center during the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in the fall 2020 were uniformly positive. By reading their written impression published in the special Christmas Edition of the Santi’s Magazine, the biggest benefits of participating in our group meetings were: to feel less lonely and isolated; to decrease anxiety, distress, depression and fear of contagion; to openly talk about their feelings and worries; to discover their strengths and abilities; to better understand mental illness and its treatment; to improve their skills in coping with symptoms and frustrating social situations; to gain a sense of hope, resilience, control and empowerment, especially in a historical time period dominated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Santi’s Magazine – 2020 Christmas Edition

D. - Prologue

“Despite the pandemic, as patients of the Santi Center we’re used to tell our daily stories, our feelings and personal experiences, even from the past. At the end of this difficult year characterized by the COVID-19 epidemic, we want to get away from our closed and restricted group dimension and to be more open towards the community which surrounds us. To do so, we use a simple communication tool: i.e. a magazine that includes our personal life stories that we learned to accept and we wanted to share. “The Santi’s Magazine” comes from a playing dimension, but it seriously talks about our journey, our thoughts and feelings, despite the pandemic. It’s a present for all of you: merry Christmas from the Santi inpatients”.

S. – My story at the Santi Center

“The Santi Center is not only a facility using care programs focused on the psychiatric illness. It treats inpatients following an intervention approach that is focused

on their health, psychological and social needs. The center offers specific care pathway for each individual in order to support her/him not only from a medical point of view (i.e. with a pharmacological therapy), but also from a social and interpersonal point of view, engaging her/him in specific psychological, educational and social group activities. Each patient has her/his personalized journey, which also may include social integration within specific interpersonal meetings valorizing individual potentials. Indeed, even during the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Santi center has continued to provide many activities: a psycho-educational group led by two volunteer psychologists, a “shiatsu” group, a yoga relaxing group and a “Nordic walking” activity that needs sticks and a hiking guide. The Santi center is a complete facility that doesn’t leave you on your own, but it walks you through your journey so that you may discover your deep down qualities”.

G. - My experience of life at the Santi Center

“I arrived at the Santi Center about 2 months ago, during the COVID-19 epidemic. I felt lost for the first few days because it was not like the place I was used to. Moreover, I was afraid of getting infected. It was my first time entering a residential community like this, but after a short time I got used to it and I met nice and altruistic people. Group participants reassured me on how to avoid the contagion, on how to use protection measures correctly. Over time, I got started feeling good within group meetings. I heard experiences and points of view of other inpatients which were very different from mine, and even if it made me upset at the beginning, subsequently it turned to be a positive thing that will help me in the future”.

M. - The inevitability of things

“It looks like yesterday when I first entered at the Santi Center with all my fears and doubts. I was also afraid of getting infected. However, it has been 2 months since I first entered. I had to deal with what surrounded me, with the medical staff and all the other inpatients. The relationships we created are unbelievable. Together with all these individuals, I managed to discover the path I was destined to take. A path that has tested me many times, but that the shiatsu, the Nordic walking and all the other group activities helped me to take and gave me the strength to fight against both my terrible mental disease and fear of contagion”.

A. - Nordic walking

“I’m here writing because on October-November 2020 I was been hospitalized at the Santi Center due to a relapse of my mental disorder. I feel like I’m the same as

every person that suffers, but also that tries to find her/his new identity, her/his personal freedom and – why not – her/his happiness. This year, due to the pandemic and its restrictions, the Santi Center provided new interesting activities. The psychoeducational group led by volunteer psychologists had been very useful. It helped me to protect me from the COVID-19 contagion, to engage myself, to open up and also to get closer with other inpatients (even if it was for a short time). Together with the shiatsu massages (that I really appreciated and helped me getting relaxed), I enjoyed a lot the Nordic walking activity. At the beginning I was afraid and not sure, but when I decided to participate I got very passionate about it. I still enjoy walking around. These group activities were a cure-all and their utility has been unequivocal. It was nice being here”.

C. – Psychoeducational journey

“The psychoeducational group consisted in 5 meetings provided every Monday at 5.30 in the afternoon at the conference room of the Santi Center. These meetings were offered at that particular time because it was after the nap so that everyone could participate. The first meeting was about psychosis. It was full of stories and personal experiences which made this journey not only a moment of information, but also a place of fun and freedom. A psychiatrist led a very interesting lesson about pharmacology and side effects of antipsychotic medications. Although we shared moments of fun and relax, we also became aware of the relevance of these topics (such as psychosis, which always gives anxiety to the patient)”.

B. – My experience

“I want to talk about my personal experience at the Santi Center in Parma where I was hospitalized in October 2020. During my 2 months of hospitalization within the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, I attended the psychoeducational group of inpatients conducted by a volunteer psychologist. In these meetings, we actively participated speaking up or listening to other people. In the group activities, there were things such as saying your opinion regarding something (such as the fear of contagion, the correct use of protective measures to counter the COVID-19 diffusion, increasing personal skills to improve social abilities), but also making up some scenes that were used as metaphors for real life situations and events. We acted like we were on the phone with another person just to increase our skill communication. I liked this group so much that I still will go to the meetings even if I’m no longer hospitalized. Moreover, it didn’t get me bored because it lasted for less than 1 hour”.

Discussion

Individuals affected by severe mental illness generally consider group activities very beneficial^{8,9}. With these group experiences, the Santi Center inpatients leaned the crucial importance of sharing their feelings, their worries and their daily stories (also about the COVID-19 pandemic and the fear of contagion). At the end of these group meetings, patients wanted to get away from their restricted dimension, from their social isolation (also due to the COVID-19 pandemic), to go beyond the closed borders of the psychiatric hospital (once again locked down after the 1978 Italian reform law)¹⁰ and to become more open towards the community surrounding them. So, they wanted to use an easy communication tool (i.e. the special 2020 Christmas edition of the Santi Magazine) in which including their personal journey, their worries, their feelings and thoughts, but also their resilience against forced social isolation and fear of contagion. Specifically, this real-world group experience during the COVID-19 era wanted to witness a stubborn attempt to contrast the general paralysis of mental healthcare interventions, which too much often had affected Italian DMHs during the intermittent waves of the pandemic¹¹. Moreover, personal perspectives of inpatients as described in the Santi's Magazine advance our understanding of the usefulness of group activities also in a period of epidemic and forced interpersonal loneliness, provided that the meetings are carried out with all the necessary precautions¹². Specifically, the subjective way inpatients experienced these interventions underlines how group activities are crucial in increasing patients' resilience¹³, also (and above all) during a psychological condition of loneliness and terror due to the COVID-19 infection.

Finally, *limitations* of this group experience should also be acknowledged. First, our activity detection lacked a psychological and/or psychopathological assessment (e.g. scales for daily functioning or quality of life). Thus,

further studies using specific psychometric evaluations are needed. In this respect, a tool for assessing anxiety related to the pandemic (such as the Italian version of the Fear of COVID-19 scale)¹⁴ could also be useful to empirically test the hypothesis that the resumption of activities is a protective factor and that it may counter the risk of isolation. Second, although we choose a qualitative perspective, further research using more stringent phenomenological approach is needed. Moreover, our sample was small, being composed exclusively by eight subjects. Indeed, we described a pilot group experience during the second wave of the epidemic. Therefore, further studies on larger clinical population with severe mental illness during the COVID-19 era are needed.

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Conflict of interest

The Authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

Author's contributions

DP, EL and GP conceptualized the group activities. DV, MLT, SR and DM conducted group activities. DP, DV, MLT and SR collected the written group experiences. DV, MS, EM and LP wrote the first draft of the manuscript. All the authors contributed to enrich and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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