

2015

Understanding the active ingredients of SMART Recovery: perceptions of group members and group facilitators

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Recommended Citation

Kelly, Peter James; Baker, Amanda; and Deane, Frank P., "Understanding the active ingredients of SMART Recovery: perceptions of group members and group facilitators" (2015). *Faculty of Social Sciences - Papers*. 1497.

<https://ro.uow.edu.au/sspapers/1497>

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Abstract

Abstract of a presentation at the ADDICTION 2015: the Australian & New Zealand Addiction Conference, Gold Coast, Australia, 20-22 May.

Keywords

members, facilitators, understanding, ingredients, active, smart, recovery, perceptions, group

Disciplines

Education | Social and Behavioral Sciences

Publication Details

Kelly, P., Baker, A. & Deane, F. (2015). Understanding the active ingredients of SMART Recovery: perceptions of group members and group facilitators. Alcohol, Other Drugs, Behavioural Addictions: Prevention, Treatment and Recovery: ADDICTION 2015 Australia: The Australian & New Zealand ADDICTION.

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Mutual support groups are the most widely accessed form of alcohol or other substance abuse treatment. Self-Management and Recovery Training (SMART Recovery) is a not-for-profit organisation that provides mutual support groups for people experiencing problematic behaviours. There are currently over 120 active SMART Recovery groups in Australia, with more than 700 groups being delivered worldwide. Whilst the theoretical framework used by SMART Recovery was intentionally developed to reflect current evidence based approaches, there has been a lack of published research specifically examining SMART Recovery. The current study aimed to explore the perceptions of both group members and group facilitators regarding the active ingredients of SMART Recovery.

A cross sectional survey was developed and distributed within SMART Recovery groups throughout Australia. The participant survey examined the participants self reported use of cognitive behavioural skills, group cohesion and the quality of group facilitation. Both the participant and facilitator surveys specifically examined perceptions regarding the most helpful active ingredients associated with SMART Recovery.

One hundred and twenty four group members and 65 group facilitators completed a cross-sectional survey. Regression analyses indicated that group cohesion significantly predicted use of cognitive restructuring, but that only provision of homework at the end of each group session predicted self-reported behavioural activation. Participants identified the 'group process' and the specific 'tools and strategies' recommended as part of the groups as being the most helpful aspect of SMART Recovery. Facilitators rated 'tools and strategies' and the 'underlying philosophy of SMART groups' as being the most helpful aspects of SMART Recovery.

SMART Recovery is an important component of the drug and alcohol treatment field. The current research helps to highlight the active ingredients of this approach. It is important that future research examine how these active ingredients influence substance use outcomes in the longer-term.