

The experiences of affected family members and friends attending *BreakThrough: Families Understanding Addiction*

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Introduction / Issues: Family members affected by addiction face challenges to their health and wellbeing, in a context of stress, stigma, and isolation. *BreakThrough* offers weekly sessions helping participants understand addiction and access support networks. Informal feedback indicated participants viewed *BreakThrough* positively, but how this translated to their daily lives was not understood. We explored the experiences and outcomes of affected family members participating in *BreakThrough*.

Method / Approach: Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with 21 family members of people experiencing addiction, recruited online at the end of *BreakThrough* sessions held July to December, 2021. The interviews were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis¹.

Key Findings: We interpreted participants' experiences as three themes: *BreakThrough* as validating their experiences; participants reflecting critically on their approaches to the addiction and changing their approach ('not fixing, stepping back'); and, *BreakThrough* as meeting an urgent need for education and knowledge, to help participants make sense of their experiences. We also summarised participants' perspectives on the online setting of the program.

Discussions and Conclusions: Our findings highlight how *BreakThrough* validates participants' experiences, particularly through addressing stigma. Participants perceived a change in coping style from 'fixing' to 'stepping back', following *BreakThrough*. They were able to harness the collective insights of peers and make sense of their experiences through education and support. Participants indicated a strong preference for attending *BreakThrough* online, for convenience and to address geographic barriers to in-person attendance.

Implications for Practice or Policy: *BreakThrough* goes beyond providing practical skills and strategies; it supports participants to shift beliefs and approaches in supporting their relative. Programs such as *BreakThrough* provide an avenue for validation and ultimately serving to de-stigmatize addiction. This information is useful to consider in the design and implementation of similar programs.

References:

¹Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). *Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide*. London: Sage

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