

Tony Levitan

ARC KSS academy is working in collaboration with the Research Design Service South East (RDS SE) to bring you inspirational stories from researchers across our region and to get tips for establishing a research career.

Tony is a Clinical Psychologist at Sussex Partnership NHS Foundation Trust working to support people with learning difficulties across Brighton and Hove. He is co-applicant on his first NIHR grant. We met him to find out more.



Q: Can you tell us a little bit about yourself? I'm a clinical psychologist and I work in the Integrated Health and Social Care Team for people with learning disabilities in Brighton and Hove. I've worked in learning disabilities for quite a while, both with children and with adults.

Q: I don't have much knowledge or experience of care for people with learning disabilities, especially working across health and social care providers, so how does that work? Brighton and Hove seems to be quite an integrated team. We're led by the council but the mental health workers are operationally led by the NHS and hosted by the council. It's a great way of addressing people's health and social care needs holistically.

Q: So how did you first get interested in research? There's always been a research component to the studies that I've been doing. There was a research component to the Masters and in my clinical training I had to complete a relatively thorough piece of research.

Q: Was that when you got the bug? Yeah... I've always been interested, but I think the thing that's driven me was just encountering clinical problems that were relatively under researched. So in clinical practice when I was looking for evidence based interventions to support the people I was working with and there was not much there. It made me want to find out a bit more really.

Q: So what are you working on at the moment? Yeah, so I've been working with some colleagues at Kings College and the University of Southampton to develop an intervention to improve people's experiences of home in residential care group living for people with learning disabilities. It really came from my experience of going into supported living accommodation and thinking about the experiences of home in relatively institutional settings. It got me interested in how that can impact their wellbeing and functioning. There's very little evidence in relation to this. So we managed to get some project funding to measure homeliness and produce a toolkit to help staff and service users to develop a greater feeling of home.

Q: You had a bit of nervous laughter there when you said managed to get funding, was it challenging? We tried a number of different routes starting with me looking for a clinical academic PhD, but being too early in a way for that. We tried for NIHR Research for Patient Benefit (RfPB) and got some feedback. Then finally the right area came up for us with the NIHR School for Social Care research. The key part has been the support that I have got from other people really. My first clinical supervisor had a big interest in research and she really supported me. She went on to an academic role at Kings so that's where we first started discussing the project. Then, we tried to broaden out our network and were in touch with a geographer of learning disabilities in Southampton specialising in participatory methods which we're using called PhotoVoice.

Q: So what do you think has been the biggest challenge in general with your research?

It's just managing the balance between clinical time and setting time aside for research as something that's important and also clinically relevant I think in lots of the services I've worked in resources have been really scarce and it's meant that much of the time my research has been outside of work.

Q: What are you most proud of so far? I think I'm quite proud that it's quite participatory, the project. We have a learning disabled co-applicant on the project. I really, really, enjoyed doing the patient and public involvement with the group that I did. Our research group in Sussex Partnership Foundation NHS Trust has been really helpful thinking through the ethical issues.

Q: So what one piece of advice would you give to other researchers out there?

I guess it's just to find someone who can act as a mentor, really. Someone who has more experience and who can help you think through some of the difficulties or think about what opportunities are best to take up and how to manage your clinical research time.

Thanks to Tony for sharing his research journey so far, good luck with your funded study.

Find out more about NIHR RfPB funding or the NIHR School for Social Care [here](#).

You can also visit the [ARC KSS website](#) to find out more about support for researchers or visit the [RDS SE website](#) for lunchtime 'Research Journey' seminars.