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The lived experience of mental health inpatients with an autistic spectrum condition: A phenomenological study

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This qualitative study explored how mental health inpatients with autistic spectrum conditions experience and cope with anxiety when admitted to an acute mental health inpatient facility in the UK. Anxiety is a common characteristic for people who live with autistic spectrum conditions and whilst studies on anxiety in this population are common place and case studies correlate anxiety with mental health service experience, little is known about the actual triggers of anxiety and its manifestations. Despite growing acknowledgment that admission to acute mental health facilities should be a last resort, reported figures on admissions in the UK to continue to rise. During 2016-2018 audio-recorded semi-structured interviews captured the experiences of 20 adults from the East of England who was former psychiatric inpatients with an established diagnosis of autistic spectrum condition. Interpretative phenomenological data analysis enabled the identification of broad themes which explained in rich detail, participant reflections regarding the situations and events within the acute care mental health facility that triggered their anxiety, behavioral manifestations of anxiety and, responses to their anxiety. It was then possible to establish the broad behavioral patterns that could be associated with their anxiety i.e. isolating themselves from others, including patients and staff, ceasing to eat and sleep adequately and all too often self-harming or exhibiting aggressive and violent behaviors. The anxiety caused by the physical environment appears to be overlooked by mental health practitioners so attention to anxiety-inducing encounters is needed when planning acute care mental health service improvement and research is required to clearly understand the experiences of this group of vulnerable people.

Biography

Paul Maloret has worked as a nurse in mental health and intellectual disability inpatient facilities for many years before joining the University of Hertfordshire where he is now the Head of the Centre of Learning Disability Studies and a Principal Lecturer in Learning Disability Nursing. This study is part of a Doctoral programme in Health Research.

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