From Nursing to Research: What SUCCEED Africa Taught Me About Research, Advocacy, and Listening

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Crossing borders from Canadian nursing to community-based mental health research in Africa, and finding the foundations that make the work matter.

When I left Canada and my work in mental health nursing, I carried with me the things every nurse carries: clinical protocols, a working knowledge of how crisis looks and sounds, and a profound belief that the person in front of you is always more than their diagnosis. What I did not yet carry was a research lens. That would come later, and it would come through SUCCEED Africa.

SUCCEED is a multi-country community-based rehabilitation trial for people living with psychosis, running across Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Malawi, and Sierra Leone. It was my first real foray into research. As an entry point, it set a bar I suspect I will spend years trying to live up to. And not because of the complexity of the methods, or the scale of the trial, or even the ambition of what it was trying to prove. But because of the people.



A team that could hold the whole picture
One of the things nobody tells you about global mental health research is how much of the work happens in the spaces between disciplines. SUCCEED brought together psychiatrists, doctors, nurses, people with lived experience, social scientists, implementation partners, and peer support researchers from five countries. Sitting at that table, or more often on those calls, I quickly understood that no single discipline had the full picture. And that was the point.

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As a nurse, I was trained to assess, to act, to respond. Researchers in my team were trained to question, to sit with ambiguity, to design. The epidemiologists were looking at populations; the qualitative colleagues, looking at individual lives. The implementation partners were looking at what was actually possible on the ground. The interdisciplinary model did not iron out these differences but used them instead. That productive friction became one of the most generative things I have ever been part of professionally.

The peer researchers who changed everything

If the team was the foundation, then the peer researchers were the catalyst. Working alongside people with lived experience of psychosis, people who had navigated the very systems and communities SUCCEED was trying to strengthen, transformed how I thought about research and, honestly, about nursing too.

Peer researchers do not just add a box to the ethics application. They change what questions get asked. They catch assumptions before they become embedded in a tool. They carry credibility in communities that are not accessible to outside researchers, because people know they have experienced this themselves. Watching them work, facilitating conversations, interpreting hesitation, knowing when to push and when to wait, reminded me that listening, too, is a form of advocacy.

That experience crystallised something for me: advocacy in research is structural. It happens in the room where the research is designed. And if the people most affected by your research are not in the room helping to shape it, you are already missing something essential.

What I take forward

SUCCEED Africa was my first research experience. I do not expect future work to replicate the feeling, but I do expect future work to uphold the same rigour of co-production:

- A commitment to interdisciplinary collaboration is a prerequisite.
- A belief in the expertise of lived experience as something that must be structurally embedded, not occasionally consulted.
- An understanding that both hard and soft skills are core to research that really changes things.
- And a recognition that listening, really listening, in the way the peer researchers modelled it, is both an advocacy act and a craft I need to keep deliberately developing.

I came from nursing in Canada asking whether I could be a researcher. SUCCEED Africa answered that question by showing me that the best research I could contribute to would draw on all that nursing had already taught me, and, alongside the right people. ask more of me. *The bar is high. I am glad it is.*

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