

## Beyond Episodic Care: Exploring the Longitudinal Gap in Mental Health Care – An Exploratory Qualitative Study

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### Abstract

Continuity of care is increasingly recognised as an important determinant of treatment adherence, patient satisfaction, and quality of life in mental health services. However, care delivery often remains centred around episodic consultations, requiring patients and caregivers to independently coordinate information, navigate referrals, and sustain engagement across multiple providers. While continuity of care has been widely discussed, relatively few studies have explored the longitudinal care journey from the combined perspectives of service users, caregivers, clinicians, and the general public. This ongoing exploratory study aims to identify barriers and facilitators to longitudinal continuity in mental health care through a narrative review of the literature, a public perception survey, and semi-structured interviews with mental health service users, caregivers, and psychiatrists/psychologists. Data will be analysed using inductive thematic analysis to identify recurring experiences related to care navigation, information continuity, therapeutic relationships, referral pathways, and between-session support. Rather than evaluating specific clinical interventions, the study seeks to understand how mental health care is experienced across the entire treatment journey. The findings are expected to contribute to a more patient-centred understanding of continuity of care and to identify practical opportunities for strengthening longitudinal coordination within existing mental health services. The study is intended to generate hypotheses and inform future research on integrated models of longitudinal mental health care.

### Keywords

Continuity of Care, Mental Health Services, Longitudinal Care, Care Navigation, Patient-Centred Care.