

5TH ANNIVERSARY NATIONAL MENTAL HEALTH AWARDS

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ENGAGING YOUTH AND THE ARTS TO GAIN INSIGHTS INTO PSYCHOSIS AND CANNABIS USE

BACKGROUND

Approximately three per cent of the population will experience a psychotic episode at some point in their lives; many will have their first experience in adolescence or early adulthood. For young people who are at the pivotal time in their lives when they are developing self-esteem, confidence, relationships and a positive outlook on life, psychosis can be particularly challenging. A psychotic episode can interrupt a youth's healthy development in any one or all of these areas if not treated early and properly.

In recent years, international studies have pointed to the potential dangers of cannabis use for people with a predisposition to mental illness, and that cannabis use can trigger psychotic symptoms, worsen the symptoms of those who have a psychotic illness and impede recovery. An estimated 30 per cent of Canadian high school students use cannabis. Approximately 80 per cent of youth who experience their first episode of psychosis also abuse substances such as cannabis, and past or present cannabis use is involved in 70 per cent of psychosis cases that are severe or do not respond well to treatment.

While early intervention for psychosis reduces psychotic symptoms and hospital readmissions, the use of cannabis can make diagnosis, treatment and recovery particularly challenging. Little information about the connection between cannabis use and mental health problems is available to youth.

Actively engaging youth in efforts to better understand the perspectives of people who use cannabis and also experience psychosis opens the doors to greater insight. Involving youth can help young people differentiate between the symptoms of psychosis and cannabis use, and support earlier intervention.

OVERVIEW

A three-year grant from Health Canada enabled the Schizophrenia Society of Canada to undertake a youth-centred research project exploring the connections between youth psychosis and cannabis. Launched in 2009, the Cannabis and Psychosis: Exploring the Link project was designed to incorporate and expand on innovative participatory inquiry research concepts that have proved well-suited to youth mental health research. (The approach engages youth in the research process from the project's outset.)

An advisory group comprising representatives from youth organizations and front-line service providers, advocates and researchers from across the country guided the project, with further collaboration from artists and arts-based communication specialist.

Central to the initiative was the participation of 28 young people who had experienced psychosis themselves and the use of arts-based communication approaches.

The youth were recruited from first-episode youth mental health clinics across Canada. “We were looking to involve youth who have experienced psychosis, to create a realistic, engaging and nuanced approaches to prevention messaging,” explains Catherine Willinsky, Manager of National Programs and Projects for the Schizophrenia Society. “Not only were youth interviewed within the project, they also conducted the interviews, and compiled and analyzed research findings.”

Trained in participatory qualitative research methodology to gather relevant information from their peers in treatment, the participating youth conducted interviews and focus groups in Halifax, London and Vancouver. They also helped develop strategies to translate the knowledge from the project into educational materials for key audiences, including youth, families and others.

Youth researchers worked with project advisors and artists to explore ways to use the arts to communicate their experiences with mental health problems. Working with experts in poetry, digital storytelling, photography and visual art, the youth told their own stories and learned to creatively communicate the project’s findings to stakeholders.

During 2010, the team conducted 50 youth interviews in individual and focus groups, in sessions ranging from 20 minutes to one hour. The sample included both males and females (aged 16–30), including those who had used marijuana as well as those who had never tried it. Participants were asked questions about aspects of their use, such as the factors that influenced their decision to use or not to use, whether they felt marijuana played a role in their first episode of psychosis and if they had strategies that helped them control paranoia.

“Health Canada understood this was a special population where young people may have spent years coping with their illness, and may have faced additional challenges that others have not,” Willinsky says, explaining the age range of the people interviewed. “By the time people are well enough to participate in this sort of initiative, they have to be pretty solid in their recovery. This can take years to establish.”

Following the conclusion of the project, its findings (including data generated from the interviews) and communication materials (including stories, poetry, reports, comics and e-learning modules) were shared widely with stakeholders, including early intervention in psychosis and youth-oriented addiction facilities across Canada, at conference presentations and on the Schizophrenia Society website.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

The research project was motivated by the belief that young people needed help to differentiate between the symptoms of psychosis and the effects of cannabis, and that they could make valuable contributions as researchers on this topic. While many websites communicate the “just say no” message, little else is available – yet there are many young people with questions.

“Large numbers of young people stand to benefit from a better understanding of these issues,” Willinsky explains. “Young people confronted with the effects of cannabis and psychosis face complex and confusing problems. It’s tough to see where one begins and the other ends. We want to share information generated by youth, reflecting their lived experience, that we hope will help other youth

to make more informed decisions.”

Because young people typically turn to peers when dealing with difficult situations, and rely heavily on their personal network of friends, youth participating in clinical programs have the ability to influence other youth at risk. This includes those who may be at risk but who have not yet been identified and those who have been identified and are in the very early stages of treatment.

Youth who were interviewed as part of the project were dealing with a double stigma: the stigma of serious mental illness and the the stigma of substance abuse. “The youth were remarkably brave,” Willinsky says. “We have all heard about the stigma of mental illness, and yet these youth were not only confronting psychosis but their drug use as well.”

INNOVATION

Because little was known about the connection between cannabis use and psychosis from the youth perspective, the Schizophrenia Society’s project was an important step. It explored the connection in two unique ways: directly involving and engaging youth in the research and capitalizing on the power of the arts to help communicate the project’s findings to youth.

The integration of the arts – in particular non-traditional forms such as rap music, poetry, comics, photography and digital storytelling – to both generate information and disseminate research results provided a unique opportunity for youth to share, interpret and implement research findings. “We wanted to discover how we could turn the experiences of these youth into art that communicates powerful messages to other youth,” says Katherine Boydell, Senior Scientist of Child Health Evaluative Sciences at Toronto’s Hospital for Sick Children, who is a long-time innovator in fusing the arts into mental health research and clinical care and who served as the senior scientific adviser for the project.

Workshops incorporating digital storytelling, poetry and photography opened new avenues of communication. On the project website (www.cannabisandpsychosis.ca), for example, black-and-white portraits of the youth put faces to the issue, and digital videos tell the stories of once troubled-youth, explaining their struggles with psychosis with explicit honesty.

The videos were produced during a three-day digital story telling workshop held at the end of the first year of the project, and gave the youth researchers an opportunity to recount their personal experiences and struggles with psychosis and recovery. “The stories have been viewed in a wide range of setting apart from the website, and have been very well-received,” Boydell notes. “They are candid and speak to the range of experience of youth without the filters of a narrator, and without attempting to direct the message.”

Training the youth researchers also built their knowledge and skills in qualitative research methods, which enhanced their knowledge and increased community research capacity

MAKING AN IMPACT

It is hoped that the release of the project’s methods and results (such as digital stories, literature reviews, interactive online resources, social media applications, etc.) will help inform a broader community mental health strategy to tackle the issue of youth cannabis use and psychosis.

The project revealed, for example, that the most common reasons why young people smoke cannabis include peer pressure, socializing with friends, curiosity, being under the influence of alcohol and because it’s “something to do.” Many youth also reported using cannabis to suppress feelings of anxiety or stress, to cope with symptoms and to “escape.”

At a workshop titled “Cannabis and Psychosis: Sharing our Knowledge” held in Ottawa, Ont., in October 2012, the arts-based approaches employed in the project and some of the project results were shared with a wide variety of stakeholders, including youth and youth engagement organizations, children’s mental health agencies, family members, educators, staff of early intervention clinics, substance use organizations, researchers and policy makers.

A comprehensive standardized training manual was developed to train the youth researchers, which could help other organizations wishing to engage in participant action research with youth.

Willinsky said many youth participants began to question their use of cannabis while exploring its connection to psychosis. “One of the things we want to show is that it is not a harmless drug for many people,” Willinsky explains. “It can actually be a frightening thing. Many people continue to use it while having a deep sense that something is not quite right. We want to promote the idea that this is something you want to stop and think about and not just blindly continue using.”

LEARNINGS AND INSIGHTS

The role of youth in the project and their willingness to reveal their own stories with peers and others was highly appreciated.

Time was also a key ingredient in the project’s success. Taking the time needed to conduct effective interviews and to build trust among all participants in the project, not just between the research assistants and the peers they were interviewing, was well invested. Receiving three-year funding for the project enabled the Schizophrenia Society to build trust with and engage youth participants on a level that may not have possible within shorter time frame. At the same time, to build trust, the youth researchers were not asked whether they had or were currently using cannabis. “We felt that this contributed to a sense of rapport and ease,” explains Boydell.

The wide range of experiences among group members also aided tremendously in cementing the group’s cohesion, and helped build synergy from the start.

THE FUTURE

In the future, the Schizophrenia Society hopes to engage youth, mental health professionals, parents and others to widely disseminate information about the issue of cannabis use and psychosis. It is increasing the use of social media and the communication networks of a range of partners and organizations, including schools, early intervention clinics, children’s mental health centres, substance use organizations and others, to share knowledge about the project and its findings and methods.