

THE NEED FOR EARLY MENTAL HEALTH INTERVENTION TO STRENGTHEN RESILIENCE IN STREET-INVOLVED YOUTH

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What do you need to know?

It is widely known that mental health challenges are common in youth who are street-involved, and include depression, hopelessness, self-harm, as well as issues with substance use. There is also a clear relationship between the stress of homelessness and emotional distress, such as depression and suicide. Furthermore, the mental health challenges of street-involved youth may interfere with their ability to access services to improve their overall circumstances. This indicates a need for evidence-based approaches to address the severe and complex mental health problems of homeless youth. Improving their mental health is a critical factor in enabling them to participate in services. Effective approaches such as those that focus on developing skills to build relationships, manage distress and strengthen motivation can disrupt a negative spiral while, at the same time, validating and providing skills to support positive choices and behaviours. Despite the harsh circumstances homeless youth experience, many still hope for a better future, and demonstrate remarkable resilience, or ability to cope with adversity. Programs and services should focus on the strengths and resilience of homeless youth.

What did the researchers do?

The researchers carried out a comprehensive assessment of mental health challenges. The study used both quantitative (numeric questionnaires) and qualitative (interactive interviews) methods. Seventy participants, ages 16-24, were recruited from four agencies serving homeless youth in Toronto. The participants completed a series of questionnaires to evaluate mental health symptoms such as depression, self-harm, suicide risk, alcohol and substance use, experiences of physical and sexual abuse, as well as resilience (ability to overcome challenges) and self-esteem. Nine youth also participated in individual qualitative interviews. Youth were also recruited to participate in two focus groups to discuss men-

tal health needs and resilience. Finally, photovoice, a research method which combines photographs with verbal descriptions, was used by participants to illustrate what it meant for them to be mentally and emotionally healthy.

Building on the results of this comprehensive assessment, which highlighted the central importance of supportive relationships in becoming mentally healthy and strong, the researchers conducted a pilot study to evaluate the effectiveness of a 6-week relationship-based intervention to reduce emotional distress, promote positive relationships and support overall positive functioning among street youth.

WHAT IS THIS CHAPTER ABOUT?



Building on a comprehensive assessment of mental health challenges in street-involved youth, this chapter describes several therapeutic interventions focused on strengthening mental health and resilience in vulnerable youth, promoting positive relationships, engaging youth in services (through Motivational Interviewing), and supporting their transition to independence (through Dialectical Behaviour Therapy). Several recommendations are also made for policy makers.

ARTICLE SOURCE

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What did the researchers find?

Regarding the comprehensive assessment of mental health challenges, both the quantitative and qualitative data indicated that the youth in this study had extremely high levels of mental health symptoms, particularly high levels of depression, anxiety, hostility, paranoia, psychotic symptoms, and emotional sensitivity. Sixty-one percent reported experiencing physical abuse, while just over 25% had been sexually abused. Thirty-one percent reported suicidal thinking, 41% engaged in some form of self-harm, and virtually all identified issues with drug and alcohol use. Even with these symptoms, however, participants displayed moderately high levels of resilience and self-esteem. The themes that emerged from the interviews with the youth illustrated their resilience and determination including: surviving life on the street, living with mental health challenges, finding strength in the midst of challenges, and seeking supportive relationships. Youth identified practical coping strategies to deal with emotional distress including thinking positively, learning from past mistakes, helping others, and pursuing goals in order to move ahead. In addition, without exception, all of the youth who participated in the qualitative interviews identified the central importance of supportive relationships with regard to their mental health.

Youth who participated in the 6-week relationship-based group intervention experienced higher levels of social connectedness (a sense of belonging and fitting in) and experienced less hopelessness (a core symptom of depression) compared with youth who did not receive the intervention, reinforcing the importance of providing psychologically-based interventions for street youth directed toward strengthening resilience and, in this case, positive relationships.

The Motivational intervention to engage youth in services is in its early stages and while the Dialectical Behaviour Therapy intervention is ongoing, informal feedback from youth and staff alike indicates that this is a promising intervention for youth who are transitioning to independence.

How can you use this research?

This research demonstrates that there may be benefits to providing psychologically-based interventions for street youth that are directed toward strengthening resilience and positive relationships rather than focused merely on mental health symptoms. It also points to the need for effective interventions for homeless youth that address those factors which prevent youth from accessing supports, including interventions that recognize the importance of developing trust within their relationships with primary service providers. Two critical intervention periods are identified in this research: 1) when youth first engage with service providers and 2) when youth transition to independence. Motivational Interviewing and Dialectical Behavioural Therapy are discussed respectively as potential interventions for these two critical periods. Finally, the need for further research on effective interventions for street-involved youth is highlighted, particularly those that reduce distress, promote positive relationships, and support overall positive functioning.

About the researchers

ELIZABETH MCCAY is currently the Research Chair in Urban Health and Associate Professor at the Daphne Cockwell School of Nursing (DCSN). Her research is focused on understanding the emotional and psychological consequences of challenging life experiences, particularly for vulnerable youth, as well as the development and evaluation of strengths-based interventions to promote healthy self-concepts, resilience and adaptive capacity in vulnerable populations.

ANDRIA AIELLO has been practicing in the field of mental health nursing for the past 13 years. Currently, she is the research coordinator for two national multi-site studies funded by CIHR: one to implement and evaluate Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT) with street-involved youth, and the other to implement and evaluate an innovative multi-component resilience and motivational intervention to meaningfully engage homeless youth.



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