How young adults perceive the causes and consequences of their mental health condition

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Background

For the past half century, the bio-medical model of mental illness has been prioritized in the design and delivery of mental health services. In the last 20 years, research has begun to emphasize the role that adverse childhood experiences and context influence mental health disparities and the experience of mental illness. However, little is known about how young adults with mental health conditions make sense of their condition, what caused their condition, and how it influences their daily lives. These perspectives can uniquely inform the design of mental health services and supports that successfully engage young adults and facilitate cross-cultural comparisons of young adult mental health.

Objective

To describe how young adults in the U.S. with diagnosed mental health conditions describe the causes, consequences, and context of their mental health condition.

Methods

One-time, in-person interviews with 55 young adults, ages 25-30, with serious mental health conditions in the United States between 2016-2017. A life story interview script asked participants about key life and mental health experiences and their education, training, and employment experiences through childhood and early adulthood. Young adults staff members with lived experience of a mental health condition conducted most of the interviews and participated in qualitative coding and analysis.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed. We employed an inductive analytic approach utilizing rapid qualitative analysis (RQA; Vindrola-Padros and Johnson, 2021) and matrix analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to expose themes related to the causes and consequences of mental health conditions.

Findings

Sample demographics

- Female: 32 (58%)
- Non-Hispanic White: 41 (75%)
- High school degree or less: 17 (31%)
- Personal income last year $10,000 or less: 35 (64%)
- Have received more than one formal MH diagnosis: 46 (84%)

Mental health diagnoses reported

- Major depression: 40 (73%)
- Anxiety or panic disorder (includes OCD): 35 (64%)
- Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD): 24 (44%)
- Bipolar disorder: 23 (42%)
- Schizophrenia or schizoaffective disorder: 16 (29%)
- Eating disorder: 7 (13%)
- Borderline personality disorder: 5 (9%)

About half of young adults described a family context of mental illness or substance use as contributing to their own mental health challenges, in a variety of ways.

About a third of young adults described sexual or physical abuse, perpetrated by a family member or friend as at least a partial cause of their own mental health challenges.

Conclusions and Implications

Young adults frequently described familial contexts of mental illness or substance use as a contributing factor to their own mental health challenges. They identified various mechanisms of this influence, including how maladaptive behavior was modeled for them, or the trauma associated with chaotic home lives. Service providers, family members, and researchers should attempt to better understand how young adults perceive of their mental health condition in order to better meet their needs and facilitate cross-cultural comparisons.

All three of the men in our family ended up abusing me. Sometimes it was sexual abuse; other times it was verbal abuse. And I think that’s how my mental state started degrading.

I was sexually abused when I was younger. And when people brought that up, it brought back memories and just tore my heart, made me go crazy and stuff like that.

I think a lot of it stemmed from when I was a child. I was a victim of sexual abuse. So, growing up I had a lot of PTS symptoms, had night terrors, couldn’t sleep at night, was afraid, and you know because of my family, I actually didn’t tell them. They didn’t know until I recently started seeing a therapist, I finally opened up to them. But for about a decade I kept it a secret, because I was afraid of anyone finding out. Anytime I would have my bursts of sort of panic attacks, or wanting to cry, I’d sort of sneak off to do it by myself.

It was in the middle of the night, and I woke up drunk, and my stepfather was raping me. I remember what his eyes were like. And the next day I lost it, I like went into this massive delusion. It was my first time with a break from reality. I didn’t know what was happening to me. I thought like he was the devil. I thought like this necklace I had was from the devil, and that it was like his power or something like that.

Young adults described challenges in school and work as the areas most negatively impacted by their mental health condition (see Sabella, 2021 for data).

Young adults also frequently described the death of a loved one (family or friend) as contributing to their mental health challenges.

My dad was my biggest support and my best friend. So after he passed away, my depression came back with a vengeance. My panic disorder, I just could not get myself together at that point.

I thought it just started after my mom passed. It’s when I first tried to seriously hurt myself.

My dad’s violent and abusive tendencies certainly contributed to my PTSD...the fact that I already had PTSD and then he would be violent on top of that, I don’t like listening to people shouting. I’m very—avoid confrontation at all costs, so his mental health and his lack of treatment definitely contributed to my PTSD.

When I went to live with my mother, things got a little more out of hand. I was hospitalized three times in one year because of her. She kept calling the police on me because of my violent behavior. Part of it was the medication. It was my first time with a break from reality. I didn’t know what was happening to me. I thought like he was the devil. I thought like this necklace I had was from the devil, and that it was like his power or something like that.

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