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This study sought to examine what community integration means to young adults with mental health disorders. More specifically, it examined their definitions of community integration, the ways in which they strive to achieve community integration, and the barriers and supports they encounter.

Method

The authors defined community integration as encompassing the ability of people to fulfill activities associated with daily living (physical integration), to interact socially with non-disabled community members (social integration), and to feel a sense of belongingness (psychological integration). Using this model, a protocol was developed for conducting focus groups. The focus group protocol consisted of a series of open-ended questions asking participants about their perceptions of the meaning of community integration; barriers and supports to community integration; and their goals and hopes for the future.

Twelve 90-minute focus groups were conducted with young persons who identified as either currently having a mental health disorder or having had one in the past. Anxiety, depression, and bipolar disorder were the three most common diagnoses disclosed by the participants; however, 22% did not identify any current mental health diagnosis. The final sample included 36 young men and 23 young women, ranging in age from 15-28 (mean age = 19.5 years). Focus groups were conducted by young adult research assistants who were trained in focus group methodology, research ethics, and confidentiality issues. Focus groups were audio-taped, transcribed, and entered into a qualitative software package for analysis. After an initial coding attempt, participants reviewed the findings and commented on the extent to which they accurately reflected their own experiences. Changes to the original findings were made in line with some of these suggestions.

Results

When asked to define community integration, participants focused on the importance of having relationships and their goals to make positive contributions to the community. Having meaningful adult roles—such as a job or being able to create artwork—gave them a sense of personal fulfillment as well as a belief they were an active member in the community. As one participant stated, “Success for me in three years is knowing that I can help others and be involved in my community as much as possible.” The importance of contribution to the community also was reflected in statements about civic responsibility and volunteering. In addition, supportive relationships with friends and family were often mentioned as being very important for community integration.

For some participants, formal supports and services were seen as necessary in order to achieve community integration. These included access to mental health services,

assistance in obtaining affordable housing, programs specifically created for transition-aged youth, and employment and educational opportunities.

A primary barrier to community integration (as reported by these participants) was the pervasive lack of understanding others had about their mental health difficulties. Many discussed stigmatizing attitudes which led them to be careful about whom to talk to about their health status: “I don’t tell people as often, because I think, one, the stigma. I’m afraid I will be judged.” However, others noted that even after disclosure, they had formed positive relationships with some co-workers and felt appreciated by some others. Being able to be open about their disorders was a common theme when discussing hopes and goals for the future. Learning about other members of the community who also had mental health conditions was reported as useful in helping them overcome their fears of stigmatization.

Discussion & Conclusions

This study sought to hear how young adults with mental health conditions attempt to live successfully within the community. In the eyes of these participants, community integration meant having successful relationships, a meaningful role in society, and being able to use services to help them achieve their goals. In other words, these responses reflect the typical developmental goals of persons in this age cohort of transition, regardless of mental health status. The authors of the study therefore suggest that behavioral health programs expand their focus beyond symptom relief in order to develop more complex individualized strategies to support young persons as they navigate their way into adulthood.

Still, some themes found in the data were specific to the repercussions of having a mental health condition. In particular, the barrier of stigmatization was a dominant topic. The decision to disclose their mental health status to friends and coworkers was described as full of risk and stress. As a solution, participants suggested the importance of accurate and open information about mental health in order to reduce stigma and increase understanding. In this way, the community at large and specific services will be more able to help them become successful and fulfilled members of their communities.

*Note: At publication time, the title of this article will be changed to: “Views of young adults with mental health disorders.”



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