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

Kathryn Sabella, PhD[1], Murron O'Neill[2], and Natalie Tincknell[2]

[1]Transitions to Adulthood Center for Research, Department of Psychiatry, University of Massachusetts Chan Medical School, Worcester, MA (USA); [2]Boston University School of Social Work

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.

You know when you're growing up with your parents, and you see them as role models, you know seeing how they react, you're learning. So, seeing my mom laying on the couch every day can definitely make you see the world in a different way. So as a woman growing up and trying to make it in the world, you look back at the women who were in your life. And I didn't see my mom do much. I mean she worked for a little bit, but not like a lot. So again, seeing her quit things because she got overwhelmed and anxious and depressed, I can see that as a pattern in my own life as well.

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 overmedication. Part of it was her manipulation. And another part of it was her alcoholism, which was part of the manipulation. And I was in three hospitals that one year.

(It) also stems from my dad just from him being angry a lot with the OCD, and then my mom and dad got divorced when I was three. And I know that my dad was like an angry person towards my mom, too, so a lot of the PTSD stems from when I was a baby.

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—I avoid confrontation at all costs, so his mental health and his lack of treatment definitely contributed to my PTSD.

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

All three of the men in our family ended up abusing me. Sometimes it was sexual abuse; other times it was verbal abuse. And that's really when 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 head apart, 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 he smelled like, I remember what shirt he was wearing, 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 <u>negatively impacted</u> 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 like a vengeance. My panic disorder, I just could not get myself together at that point.

I think it just started after my mom passed. , It's when I first tried to seriously hurt myself."

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. Young adults frequently described sexual or physical abuse as a causal factor in their own mental health challenges, as well as the loss of a loved one. While services in the U.S. are largely founded on the bio-medical model of mental illness, young adults assign significant causal value to adverse childhood experiences. 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.