Making Research Real
Schizophrenia Society of Ontario - Spring 2010

Welcome to Making Research Real, the Schizophrenia Society of Ontario’s forum for current developments in schizophrenia research from across Canada. Making Research Real is designed to provide information that is current, applicable, and relevant to showcase ground-breaking work that can make a difference in the lives of those living with schizophrenia.

Combating obesity among people with mental illness
Psychotic disorders, eating habits, and physical activity: Who is ready for lifestyle changes?

Obesity and being overweight are common problems among people taking antipsychotic medications. Studies indicate that between 40 and 80 percent of individuals taking second-generation antipsychotics gain up to 20 percent of their ideal body weight. This weight gain is often influenced by factors such as motivation and energy problems that reduce the capacity for healthy nutrition and regular exercise.

Obesity is a major health concern, and motivating someone to participate in an exercise program that he or she is not ready for is a major challenge for health practitioners.

The goal of this study, conducted by a team of researchers from McMaster University and St. Joseph’s Healthcare in Hamilton led by Suzanne Archie, MD, was to use the transtheoretical model to determine the diet and physical activity patterns of people with psychotic disorders and identify which of these individuals were ready to consider lifestyle changes that would help them manage their weight. The transtheoretical model, also known as the “stages of change” model, identifies six stages of change and is designed to help health practitioners assess how ready patients are to change their lifestyles.

In this case, researchers based their study on the Patient-Centered Assessment for Exercise and Nutrition questionnaire, which condenses the six transtheoretical model stages into three: precontemplation, contemplation-preparation and action. The objective was to identify people in the contemplation-preparation range—the stage that indicates a readiness for change.

The study surveyed a total of 101 participants between the ages of 18 and 55 diagnosed with a psychiatric disorder; of which 71 percent had schizophrenia or schizoaffective disorder. Of the 99 participants for whom a Body Mass Index (BMI) score was calculated, only 24 percent had scores within the normal range, compared to 46.7 percent for Canadians overall. Among study participants, 38 percent of the sample were overweight (compared with 33.3 percent of Canadians), while 36 percent were obese (compared to 14 percent of Canadians).

Among the study’s findings:

- On average, participants in the study exercised for 30 minutes, 1.4 to 1.9 times per week, compared to the British Heart Foundation’s recommendation of 30 minutes of vigorous exercise five times per week;
- In general, study participants consumed vegetables and fiber infrequently—8 percent ate vegetables once a day, 17 percent consumed fruit at least twice a day, and 38 percent ate a green salad once a week—and consumed fat at a level just below what is considered “unacceptable” by nutritionists.

The finding that 50 percent of participants were in the contemplation-preparation stage is encouraging given that previous studies of people with schizophrenia found lower proportions in this stage. It also suggests that promoting lifestyle changes may be a viable approach for people with mental illness. This could include educating people to make better food choices and encouraging them to participate in exercise such as walking, jogging and cycling, options that are both inexpensive and accessible to many people.

The study also recommends tailoring lifestyle counselling to an individual’s readiness for change. For example, those in the precontemplation stage could be encouraged to identify potential benefits, drawbacks, and roadblocks to healthy eating, while those in the contemplation-preparation group could move on to weighing the benefits and costs of healthy lifestyle activities.

The full study can be found in the journal Psychiatric Services, volume 58 no. 2, published in 2007 (pages 233-9).
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