

New studies managing psychiatric meds in transition to college

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An increasing number of students are packing more than their computers and iPods when leaving for college. They are bringing along prescribed psychiatric medications. Case Western Reserve University researchers will survey incoming students on how they manage psychiatric medications in the transition from home to college.

And once on campus, experiencing new freedom from supervision by mom, dad and hometown mental health providers in taking those medications may present an opportunity to experiment with stopping those meds.

This has researchers and mental health counselors on campuses concerned about whether counseling centers are meeting all the needs of these students. That concern has become the focus of a new Case Western Reserve University study about how students manage their mental illnesses.

This fall, Case Western Reserve University's Jerry Floersch of the Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences; Eileen Anderson-Fye, an assistant professor of anthropology; and Jes Sellers, director of the University Counseling Center and adjunct assistant professor of psychology and clinical instructor in the department of psychiatry, will begin a two-year, \$75,000 Presidential Research Initiative study, "College Student Experience of Mental Health Service Use and Psychiatric Medication."

Findings from the campus-based study also will contribute to a larger international project, under the direction of McGill University in Montreal, Quebec, investigating the social and cultural differences associated with taking psychiatric medication among college students in Japan, Canada and the United Kingdom.

The researchers will conduct a quantitative survey of 120 undergraduates and conduct intensive qualitative interviews with 15 first-year and 15 third-year students about their experiences with their illnesses and management of medications. Each of these undergraduates will be followed for two years, tracking their Case Western Reserve experiences with faculty, students and mental health providers.

This will be one of the first studies to examine how this student group adjusts in the transition to campus life and independence where student face responsibility for their own care. The other part of the study will examine what faculty members do when students disclose that they have a mental illness.

Leaving home is also a time for students to experiment. Floersch said the students need to know it's okay to have the desire to experiment, but they need to let mental health counselors know about it and receive the appropriate help in arriving at that decision.

The study was initiated because of a gap in research and information available about the life and experiences of adolescents on medications and how they cope at college. It builds on research begun in Floersch's National Institute of Mental Health project about the adolescent's perception of taking psychiatric medications.

Information from the study will guide campuses in providing mental health services.

"University mental health providers have observed increased numbers of students visiting college mental health centers," report the researchers.

From meetings around the country, Floersch noted discussions about an alarming increase in severity of student psychopathologies—changes that are pushing campus mental health centers far beyond their capacity to meet student needs.

"We're at a time when students are being diagnosed at a younger age with mental illnesses," said Floersch, adding that there is a critical need today to help students make the transition to managing their own mental health care.

Source: Case Western Reserve University

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