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Addressing the Physical Health Challenges Impacting Young Individuals with Major Mental Illness



Research has found that individuals who suffer from major mental illness, such as schizophrenia, are dying on average 15-25 years earlier than those who do not suffer from schizophrenia.¹ Many causes for this shortened lifespan are suspected. Those causes include: lack of access to health care, suicide, poverty, substance use and side effects from anti-psychotic medications.¹ The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) has challenged mental health providers treating major mental illness to address this disturbing trend by promoting their “10x10” campaign. The goal of the campaign is to increase the lifespan of individuals who suffer from major mental illness by ten years over the next ten years.¹

One example of a program that has taken on this challenge is Oregon’s Early Assessment and Support Alliance (EASA). EASA is a systematic effort within Oregon to prevent early trauma and disability caused by schizophrenia-related conditions. The goal of EASA is to identify individuals in the earliest possible stage of a schizophrenia-related condition and provide rapid and intensive treatment to the individual experiencing the condition and to their family and/or primary support system. EASA programs are currently active in sixteen Oregon counties and are free to individuals who meet criteria for a new schizophrenia-related condition.

EASA programs attempt to curb the historically poor health outcomes among people with schizophrenia by coordinating with primary care providers, monitoring for side effects of medications and general health issues, supporting healthy lifestyles, and engaging the individuals and their family/primary support systems with the EASA team members in addressing the risk factors early.

The following is from an interview with “Chris”*, a 21-year-old male college student who recently graduated from an EASA program. He was interested in sharing his

story about health challenges he faced as a result of a psychotic episode and subsequent medical care.

For many individuals in the EASA program, their mental health condition starts at a young age and often with severe consequences. The age of onset for conditions like what Chris experiences is often late teens or early adulthood. Chris’s experience is really no different. As a college student Chris was active in sports, and talented enough to play for the college’s team. He was very fit and had been for as long as he could remember. Approximately two years ago Chris experienced a psychotic episode resulting in a psychiatric hospitalization, the loss of his academic enrollment, and the loss of his housing.

While in the hospital Chris was started on Zyprexa, an atypical anti-psychotic medication to help in stabilizing his symptoms. Although Chris described the medication as helpful, it did result in him gaining 55 pounds over the course of 4 months and “feeling tired all the time.” Chris said he did not notice the weight gain initially; it was only when his friends pointed it out to him that he really started taking a closer look at the changes in his body: “I was working with the EASA nurse, and she had me get on the scale... I was surprised by the number,” he said. “I did not think I could gain that kind of weight. I was always running and skiing, I never had to worry about it before... This whole situation made me pay attention to many things I had never noticed before.”

Chris, like many young people, did not have what would be described as a healthy diet prior to the onset of his symptoms, but he stated he “would only eat junk food during special occasions.” But when Chris lost his home and began living in a hotel due to his mental health challenges, eating well became more difficult. “I did not have access to any healthy food,” he stated. “I did not have a store close by and my only place to keep food was a small fridge...I did not have the opportunity to eat healthy even if I wanted to.”

To help in managing the weight gain and what Chris's doctor described to him as a "pre-diabetic" condition, Chris was prescribed another medication without the metabolic profile of Zyprexa. Unfortunately that medication resulted in a manic episode and he was forced to discontinue it.

Chris was asked how he coped with the weight gain and what he did to manage the health concerns expressed by his doctor. "I met with the EASA nurse once every three weeks or so. We watched my weight, monitored my labs and she provided me with support and ideas." One of those ideas was to get support from a naturopathic physician who provided him with ideas of foods to eliminate or reduce from his diet. "I gave up beer, cigarettes, caffeine, and dairy... I also started taking fish oil."

When asked about the most important thing he did to help himself get and stay healthy, Chris responded, "With the help and support of the EASA team, I was able to move in with my parents. EASA and my parents then helped me get back onto my normal routine and get back to school. Once back in school I took weight lifting and basketball classes. It was helpful to have the motivation of getting a grade to get me back to exercising again."

Chris was asked what advice he would give to other young people who experienced similar challenges. He advised, "Find an exercise activity that you love to do... and do it with people that you enjoy... and do it at least two times a week."



Over the last year Chris lost all the weight he gained. He is active with sports and plays on a college club team; he is also working part time and has applied to graduate programs. He worked closely with his EASA doctor to reduce and ultimately stop the Zyprexa. He has been off that medication for the last eight months without a relapse in symptoms. He does continue to take the fish oil for symptom prevention and, because "It makes me feel smarter."

Chris was asked how he maintains his healthy lifestyle now that he has completed the EASA program. "I have gone back to allowing myself to indulge on unhealthy foods on the weekends, especially if I am out with my friends, but during the week I watch what I eat and my family now helps me with that."

Chris's story is a good example of the multiple risk factors associated with a schizophrenia-related condition. Following the onset of his condition, Chris lost access to his education, his home and his social activities. The treatment initially offered to Chris, although helpful in reducing his symptoms, resulted in significant weight gain and inactivity. He also took up smoking cigarettes, which is common for individuals first experiencing psychosis. Chris's story also represents how an EASA team worked with Chris and his family to support him in getting his life back and reducing the health risks that could have had long term consequences for his life. The concerns Chris described are common with individuals in EASA programs. To address these health challenges amongst the myriad of other challenges individuals in the early stage of a schizophrenia-related condition face, EASA programs take a holistic and collaborative approach when working with individuals like Chris. EASA team members include mental health counselors, nurses, physicians, occupational therapists and employment/education specialists. The entire EASA team meets weekly to coordinate care focusing both on risk factors and the individual's personal goals. It is the hope of EASA programs across Oregon that this approach to health care for individuals in the early stage of a schizophrenia-related condition will assist in meeting SAMHSA's 10x10 challenge as well as assist individuals in getting back on track with the lifestyles they enjoyed prior to the onset of their condition. To learn more about EASA and the early warning signs of a major mental illness, please go to www.easacommunity.org.

**Some information from this interview, including Chris's name, has been changed to protect his identity.*

REFERENCES

1. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2011). About SAMHSA's wellness efforts. Retrieved from (<http://www.promoteacceptance.samhsa.gov/10by10>).

AUTHORS

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"Chris" is a full time university student.