Facilitators for coping with the COVID-19 pandemic: A qualitative study comparing youth and young adults with and without disabilities

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Background

- Measures put in place during the Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) pandemic such as physical distancing and closure of schools and businesses has had a large impact on the population’s mental health
- Youth and young adults with disabilities are at particular risk of the psychological implications of the pandemic
- Youth who use coping strategies during stressful times often have lower levels of depression and anxiety
- Facilitators of coping include having a positive framework, being physically active, having a support network and staying connected with others

Objective

To understand facilitators for helping youth and young adults with and without disabilities to cope and maintain mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic

Methods

Design: Qualitative study design involved semi-structured interviews done remotely (Zoom n= 29 Phone n=5), was guided by interpretive descriptive methodology and with a purposive sample

Inclusion Criteria

- Youth aged between 15-29, with a disability or without a disability
- Employed or have work experience

Sample

- 34 Youth and young adults aged 16-29 years (Mean: 23.2)
  - 17 youth with disabilities (Mean: 24.7)
  - 17 youth without disabilities (Mean: 21.7)

Key Themes

Social Support

- Youth with disabilities more commonly mentioned family as a support
- Youth without disabilities described more sources of support including friends, work colleagues and extended network

“’I am fortunate enough to be living with my family still; So, mentally I have been okay for the most part…We’ are all going through the same things and emotions” (#10 - disability).

Financial Support

- Youth with disabilities were more likely to receive government support Canadian Emergency Response benefit (CERB) and Canadian Emergency Student Benefit (CESB)
- Youth without disabilities had several sources of financial supports (e.g., employment, family, CERB/CESB)

“I don’t think I’m in such an urgent position to be hired right now as I’m still a student, and I’m living with my parents. I don’t have to worry about rent or groceries” (#33 - no disability).

Keeping Busy

- Most youth explained how keeping busy prevented boredom, which was important for their mental health

“If I have certain things to do even on a weekly basis, it helps me to keep track of time, but also for me to have a schedule…Having classes occupied my time rather not having anything to do at all” (#4 - disability).

Work-life Balance

- Most youth described how they had more time to focus on their well being

“I benefited from it being online and at home because transportation is a big barrier for me because I can’t drive. I’d either have to get a ride or use (accessible) transit…Even with my family I hate having to schedule rides...I always feel I have to rely on someone.” (#9 - disability)

Implications

- Understanding youths’ coping strategies is important because the impact of the pandemic could have longer-term negative health effects
- The successful management of stress could lead to personal growth, which can reinforce sense of competence and become a protective factor for coping with future stressors

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