

“Getting in touch with the body can be super impactful on mental health”: exploring the experiences of young people and staff in Wellness Programs within integrated youth services in Canada.

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Introduction

Foundry is an integrated youth health service (established in 2015) for young people (aged 12-24) in British Columbia, Canada that offers five core health streams. Foundry implemented Wellness Programs beginning in 2019 for young people to engage in recreation activities (inclusive of physical activity) alongside traditional health services. The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of young people and program staff engaging in Wellness Programs.

Approach/Methods

Using a participatory action approach, a collaborative team was formed of four youth peer evaluators, one research and evaluation associate and one researcher. Data was collected through virtual semi-structured focus groups (n=2) with young people who attended Wellness Programs and one-on-one interviews (n=7) with program staff who delivered Wellness Programs. A thematic analysis is being conducted.

Results

Preliminary results indicate youth felt the programs helped to improve physical and mental health and to enhance social connections especially during an isolating time. Youth expressed they hoped the programs could be easier to register for and wanting more in-depth mental health conversations. Staff acknowledged barriers to running programs along with regular health care duties, a need for more youth involvement and to offer transportation and food/water for youth. Both groups acknowledged wanting future hybrid (online and in-person) programs.

Conclusion

The findings demonstrate that recreational activities can be integrated within health services and can impact self-reported health and social connections for young people. The findings also indicate the need to address program accessibility in the future including offering hybrid programs and transportation.