

Look Out! – A Guide for Youth Wanting to Engage in Mental Health Research

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It is becoming more common for youth mental health researchers to engage youth with lived/living experience of mental health challenges in the design and execution of research projects. Young people may participate in research to learn new skills and help improve health outcomes; however, they also face the risk of harm. For youth with no previous experience of engagement in research, it can be hard to know what to be aware of. Based on my experiences of engaging in Canadian youth mental health research projects, here are some considerations for youth:

- **Compensation**

Youth engaged in research projects should be compensated for their time and expertise – ideally, financially. In Canada, there are various public documents that list “fair” compensation rates for engagement in research. Financial compensation often includes gift cards or electronic fund transfers (EFTs), but not all institutions offer these methods. Compensation can also be non-financial, such as reference letters or mentorship opportunities.

- **Description**

Recruitment postings should offer specific descriptions of youth roles within research projects. This includes details regarding tasks, training, timelines and compensation. If the language is vague or you have questions, reach out to the project contact included in the recruitment materials. If you feel like you are still unsure of expectations, it may be helpful to check in with yourself regarding whether the project is the right fit for you. While some projects

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are designed to be co-created with youth, leaving some details unknown, projects that lack structure can cause harm and confusion for youth being engaged. Be mindful that some project descriptions may also overpromise opportunities that cannot be delivered. If a part of the description sounds too good to be true, it may be worth learning more from the project contact.

- **Who Is Involved**

Sometimes a quick Internet search on the project leads can offer great insights into the type of work they are known for and their affiliations with different institutions/organizations. Moreover, if you know someone who has worked with the researchers before, it can be helpful to ask them about their experience.

- **Vibes**

I am not kidding – this is seriously something to consider when deciding whether to participate in a research project. I once applied to a mental health advisory committee that sounded great on paper and like a good fit for me. However, when I was interviewed and met the project coordinator, I instantly knew that I would not feel comfortable in the role. The project coordinator was cold and unfriendly, and I knew that I could not be open and vulnerable on their committee. I often have a fear of missing out on projects and worry that if I do not take every opportunity, I will miss out on something really cool. However, not every opportunity is meant for you, and it is important to check in with yourself to make sure that you feel good about the projects you participate in. There will always be plenty of opportunities, and it is important to put your well-being first.

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- **Accountability Mechanisms**

Based on my experience of research engagement to date, many project recruitment materials do not include accountability mechanisms or complaint processes. This is something that I am hoping to change. Youth should know that there are protections in place if they have conflicts with research team members or experience harm. If you come across any recruitment materials that do mention accountability mechanisms, that is a major green flag.

Overall, if you are a young person looking to participate in research, I highly recommend taking some time to think about what you are looking for. For example, how would you like to be compensated for your time? What details are important for you to know before committing to a project? Are there any values that you think are important for researchers or institutions to exhibit when partnering with them? What would make a research environment feel safe to you? These are all questions to ask yourself to make an informed decision on opportunities that come your way. Contributing to research is so exciting, and in addition to all the things to be aware of, there is also so much to look forward to!

