TRANSITION-AGED YOUTHS AND THE EFFECT ON EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING

To the Editor:

I read with great interest the article, “Transition-Aged Youths With Dual Diagnoses,” by Kalinyak, Faye, Killion, and Suresky (2016) from the March 2016 issue of the Journal of Psychosocial Nursing and Mental Health Services. The article discusses problems encountered by transition-aged youths with mental illness and substance abuse. Kalinyak et al. (2016) mention that when transition-aged youths experience mental disorders and substance abuse, the ability to realize their full potential is jeopardized as they pass through transition. However, I was left wondering, from a neurological perspective: how does the brain change from adolescence to adulthood, and what effect does that have on executive functioning?

Blakemore and Choudhury (2006) define executive functioning as the capacity in which we control and coordinate our thoughts and behavior. These abilities may be expected to improve during adolescence due to changes in the frontal cortex. However, executive functions may be more difficult to integrate into brain networks once established after puberty (Blakemore & Choudhury, 2006), which I believe has a significant impact on why “transition-aged youths with dual diagnoses are presented with greater challenges the further they venture into the adult phase of their lives” (Kalinyak et al., 2016, p. 49).

In addition, immature frontal lobe functions may make adolescents more susceptible to risky behavior, such as drug experimentation (Schepis, Adinoff, & Rao, 2008; Verdejo-García, Lawrence, & Clark, 2008). These types of experiments can alter executive functioning skills. For instance, substance abuse affects the brain’s ability to mature and develop in such a crucial stage of development. Given that it is already difficult to integrate executive functioning skills into brain networks, introducing experimentation of various drugs could make it impossible for transition-aged youths to reach their full developmental potential, and may result in impaired functioning in three functional domains: (a) family, (b) school, and (c) community (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

Substance abuse is becoming an epidemic among adolescents. Future efforts should focus on baseline testing of individuals throughout childhood, adolescence, and adulthood to identify the maturation of executive functioning skills throughout development. If researchers are able to identify a direct correlation with delayed executive functioning skills and predisposition to substance abuse, preventive treatment options can change to address this epidemic.

Baseline testing as an early intervention may be a key component in addressing the substance abuse epidemic nationwide.

REFERENCES


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