

Matt Larsen - University of Calgary

Project: Learning to Cope: An Exploration of Coping Strategies Used by People with Lived Experience of Homelessness and Diabetes



Background

Effectively managing diabetes while also dealing with homelessness is particularly challenging. However, some people with lived experience of homelessness and diabetes (PWLEHD) are able to successfully adapt, overcome their difficult circumstances, and manage their chronic illness and social

complexity. The factors that contribute to these positive outcomes have not been well described.

This study aims to explore the adaptive and maladaptive coping mechanisms used by individuals who have simultaneously experienced diabetes and homelessness by determining how PWLEHD adapt to the challenges they face.

Patient partners who have lived experience of homelessness and diabetes will actively participate in all stages of the research project, from the gathering and analysis of interview data to the dissemination of our findings. With the assistance of patient partners, I will conduct interviews with PWLEHD that focus on exploring ways of coping with adverse circumstances.

This study will contribute a rich understanding of what it is like to live with homelessness and diabetes and how individuals in these difficult situations cope. Developing coping mechanisms that are adaptive will not only aid in the management of one's diabetes but will also help individuals secure stable housing and employment.

In January 2019, Matt saw a flier advertising a research study for people with diabetes who had experienced homelessness. The following week he attended his first session of the Toronto Clients with Diabetes Action Committee (Toronto CDAC) and began his work as a community co-researcher. The deference the academic researchers showed him and the other group members made him feel that their difficult experiences could yield something positive. This is something he still believes to this day.

In April 2021, Matt joined a similar community-based research group, the Calgary Diabetes Advocacy Committee (CDAC), but this time as a peer researcher working alongside academic researchers. Hearing how group members overcome their difficulties reminded him of the resilience demonstrated by those he worked with as an ESL teacher. This sparked his interest in learning more about why people flourish despite the hardships they face. He spoke to the principal investigator of the CDAC, Dr. David Campbell, and expressed his desire to study this while obtaining a master's degree.

Matt's work as a community co-researcher has taught him how powerful this work can be. Meetings are safe spaces where everyone can talk with those who understand what they have been through. The group gives them a feeling of belonging, something that is particularly hard to come by for this population. After finishing his training, Matt wants to continue this work in order to empower his peers to undertake research and advocacy projects that are as meaningful and impactful for them as these research groups are for him.