

College Life- Food, Drugs and Health

Nov. 19th, 2015 Webinar

Key Discussion Items

- Healthy Relationships with Food and Substances—Framework for Moving Forward is available online on the Healthy Minds | Healthy Campuses website

Dialogue on Influences

Tim Dyck and Shelley Hine

- Influences on eating and substance use include: academic pressures, access, built environment, financial status, fitting in, friendships, knowledge and skills, mental health, policies and transitions
- **Academic Pressures:** pressures around grades, deadlines, exam schedules, results, etc. What kind of effect do these performance demands have on students in relation to their decisions around substance use and eating?

“We can’t pretend to remove all student stresses, but what can institutions do to mitigate stressors and produce an environment and situation in which students are better equipped to relate to them?”

a coping mechanism for raised anxiety levels

- We know for someone who already has disordered eating or a full blown eating disorder, engaging more fully in that restrictiveness can lead to really dire consequences
- Disordered eating is also perceived as a more acceptable coping mechanism for substance abuse rather than substance abuse is
- We can’t pretend to remove all student stresses, but what can institutions do to mitigate stressors and produce an environment and situation in which students are better equipped to relate to them?

- **Access:** in relation to eating and substance use. What really is available to students in vending machines, campus outlets, cafeterias, grocery stores nearby? What type of access do they have in relation to food and substance use?
 - This is a crucial time as students are often on their own for the first time, they are differentiating themselves. Some students may not know what to shop for, how to shop, have time to shop, living in residence and not having access to other people who can mentor you, etc.

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Healthy Relationships with Food and Substances on Campuses—Framework for Moving Forward

Eating and substance use are associated with health issues on college campuses. Like sex and other feel-good things in life, food and psychoactive substances change the way people feel. And, just as food and substances have benefits, they can also lead to health and social problems.

The Centre for Addictions Research of BC (CARBC), Jason's Legacy Eating Disorders Prevention Program (JL), and the Canadian Mental Health Association, BC Division (CMHA BC) invited BC post-secondary institutions to help us think through the issues related to the intersection of substance use and eating in campus settings.

We held four focus groups with campus members, including students, residence staff, health promotion staff and faculty, to explore the following questions:

- How do campus members experience their relationships with food and substances and the intersection of these relationships?
- Why do these intersections exist (what is influencing these experiences in the campus environment)?
- How can campuses be supportive in creating healthier relationships with both food and substances?

This framework is meant to reflect back what was discussed in the focus groups, and to give others a sense of what was shared. The goal is to use these ideas and observations to help

campuses determine how they want to move forward with health promotion in this area and how the partners (CARBC, JL, CMHA BC) can support them.

Focus group participants were asked to talk about their perspectives, experiences and observations on how relationships with food and substances play out on campus. Some common themes emerged:

• Across the consultations, there was a general sense that students experience a variety of relationships with food and substances, including disordered eating and unhealthy substance use. The literature suggests that most people who have some form of disordered eating behaviour or who use alcohol in risky ways fall short of clinical disorder diagnoses. Nonetheless, they often face struggles that undermine well-being.¹⁴

• It was noted that substance use and food interact when students anticipate craving alcohol and engage in practices to avoid taking in more calories or to influence the effects. For instance, eating before drinking to avoid a hangover or restricting food to get drunk faster on an empty stomach. This interaction of drinking and compensatory tactics is consistent with studies reported in the literature. Participants also mentioned that substance use and disordered eating intersect after using cannabis or drinking alcohol. For example, getting the “munchies” and making

- Peer pressure plays a huge role in using substances and body image. Starting a new life with pressures that are very different, restricting calories, bingeing and purging can be a coping mechanism for coping with these transitions
- You can see a rise in eating disorders on campus, as well as substance use
- How readily is the access to alcohol? Do we overly restrict alcohol? Institutions can think through how do we relate to these situations? What alternatives do campuses provide in terms of access to options of substance use and food situations?
- **Built Environment:** in terms of our material and social structure in place at institutions, the nature of our residence settings, the way things are done, the layout of pubs, campus spaces, etc. How do these spaces influence eating and substance use?
 - Peer pressure around eating. When people move into their own places after the first year, disordered eating and substance use can lessen.
 - In residence, there can be a lot of talk about body image and focus on this. This can cause disordered eating among women.
 - When you add substances into this mix, it can have dire circumstances. When you have a brain that's functioning on restricted calories, it can really influence your alcohol consumption or your substance consumption in unhealthy ways.
 - Accessibility of good food and knowing how to access good food and mentors.
 - Do our surroundings on campus favourable to isolation, time alone or are there opportunities for students to get together and build relationships in meaningful ways? Do our surroundings facilitate eating and substance use as something that is primary or secondary? Do we promote good exercise, undistracted studying and solid sleep?
- **Financial Status:**
 - If you don't have money for healthy food, then you can't buy it. And if you don't have access to healthy food, as well that plays a huge part. Financial constraints play a big part.
 - Sometimes it comes down to what you want to do: do you want to go out and go to a party at night or do you want to spend your money on food during the day? Sometimes the choice is not an obvious one in terms of what's good for a person when you're looking at social pressures, social norms, wanting to fit in and going out with friends.
 - What sort of options are available to students on campus and alternate expenditures are offered to students?
- **Fitting In:** making students feel like they belong. Use of substances can sometimes be a boundary marker for who is included or excluded.
 - You may feel isolated in eating. So option may be to refrain from eating altogether.



“When you have a brain that’s functioning on restricted calories, it can really influence your alcohol consumption or your substance consumption in unhealthy ways.”

- Other influences include: friendships, knowledge and skills, mental health, policies and transitions
- It is easy for us to look at these influences on eating and substance use and think about how we can work with individual students on these challenges, but let's look at what we can we as institutions do to really help everyone in really collective ways, to set up a real culture, an ethos, an environment, a climate that is really conducive to good, healthy, encouraging practices of eating and substance use together.

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Campuses Services Panel

Ai-Lan Chai, Brenda Slomka, Michael Waglay, and Sarah Hanson

- Reflecting on the Framework, it attempts to present a picture of the relationship between food and substance use on campus. Across the consultations, there was a general sense that students experience a variety of relationships with food and substances. The literature suggests that most people who have some form of disordered eating behaviours or who use alcohol in risky ways often fall short of a clinical diagnosis, although we do recognize that there are those who are members of our campus that certainly do fit in that category. The struggles that students across that spectrum face often undermine their wellbeing.
- From your perspective, how is the relationship with food and substances playing out on campus?
 - There are so many new experiences with new students around food and alcohol use. For example, most students coming to post-secondary are coming straight out of high school so experimentation around alcohol; a lot of times, family provided food that was made for them. So now they have to make their own choices. The new transition of independence around food and alcohol is really foundational to the conversation we are having. How do we as professionals educate, bring awareness, etc. to students?
- From your experience at the clinic and seeing students who are directly having some of these experiences, do you have a perspective you'd like to share as you reflect on the different conversations that you've had?
 - The continuum of difficulties that people have and the issues we see, they are indeed sub-clinical but people transition from a diagnosable category to sub-clinical. People fluctuate along the continuum. To offer services along this continuum is very important. Allowing students to have access as they transition out of a diagnostic category; they can still be supported by a professional.
 - How to nurture, how to make sure students cope well? Professionalism plays a role. Systems perspective. Factors contribute to more escalation (Eg. Athletes have pressure to perform well, to achieve, peer pressure, etc.)
 - Important to recognize the whole student.
- Money that should have been used for food was used on beer in one experience with a high level student athlete.

- They are people who come to university with an existing eating disorder in high school. It has been a coping mechanism that worked for them in the past, so it may re-surface with pressures of university or college.
- There is a food bank on almost every campus and they are seeing rising numbers of people going to them. This might have to do with the rising costs that are associated with earning an education (tuition fees), rising costs of housing. Food banks have a very limited effect on food bank and security and there are more people who are struggling than who show up at the food bank. The issue of not having enough plays a role in people's mental health and also the choices being made around substances and food.
 - A food bank could be a "Band-Aid" solution



"It's not enough to teach people to be healthy, if the environment in which they live undermines their ability or motivation to engage in healthy actions."

- **What Could Be- Big Ideas: Gaining a better understanding of what a healthy relationship with food and substances looks like**
 - Healthy relationship with food is being able to have access to it, knowing a lot about the nutrition aspects of food, being part of a food culture, knowing/being more connected to the sources of food and being aware of disordered eating that can take place. Also have to put some responsibility of the conditions that people are living in, how stressful a situation is (beyond campus as well), factors that inhibit your ability to eat healthily.
 - As a society, we don't have good relationships with food. Some campuses have local farmers markets, where they can get healthy local food. Have people relate more to growing food. Accessibility, affordability, and spaces all influence this relationship.
 - Eating can be a time of connection, joy and fun; food can taste food. This is different discourse than access and affordability to food. Similar with substances, there can be a "not too much, not too often and only in safe contexts" perspective to take.

- **What Could Be- Big Ideas: Making the healthy choice the easy choice**

- How can campuses encourage positive choices?
- Gets at pieces around conditions and environment. Focus group participants noted health literacy as well as these environmental factors as influences on choices around eating and substance use.
- It's not enough to teach people to be healthy, if the environment in which they live undermines their ability or motivation to engage in healthy actions.
- Our Canadian perspective on food is not representing all the students we are serving. The time it takes for food prep, how different cultures prioritize food varies. Celebrating food, bringing people together. Sometimes there are limitations about what food can be brought on campus due to contracts. Building relationships with local establishments close to campuses is important. Sometimes people just don't know. Are there ways in residence to complete a challenge to encourage healthy eating? Use food as the framework that brings people together.



"If you have the will to make the healthy choice the easy choice, you can truly transform food and by extension people's mental health as well. "

- Have those healthy choices available in a campus context. A healthier choice costs a lot more. Food is a variable cost that often gets sacrificed when you have other expenses. Cheaper, high quality food options are needed on campus. Also need education and promotion to create a healthy food culture.
 - If you have the will to make the healthy choice the easy choice, you can truly transform food and by extension people's mental health as well.
 - It has to be written in the DNA of institutions that they care about food. From a financial point of view, from a planning point of view, etc. The solution to making it easier is that it needs to start with administrators and key decision makers.
 - Looking to build commitment from change makers to make a positive difference.
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- “It has to be written in the DNA of institutions that they care about food. From a financial point of view, from a planning point of view, etc. The solution to making it easier is that it needs to start with administrators and key decision makers.”
- **What Could Be- Big Ideas: Promoting social support and social responsibility**
 - It is heavy on the individual to make the right decisions all the time, so important to provide more support and more compassion if they make the wrong choices.
 - There are unhealthy practices throughout our population. Looking for a term to borrow from “low-risk drinking” to apply to disordered eating.
 - There is still a lot of responsibility on the individual to make the right choices. It would be lovely to see people caring for each other.
 - Food can be very nurturing. Important we create a nurturing environment.

Student Reflective Panel

Matty Hillman and Aveleigh Campbell-Wayman

- Selkirk College hosting Dinner Basket Conversations → open invitation to create a meal, serve and consume together.
 - Community connection, free meal for students, addresses food knowledge and awareness, and includes discussion around stress management and relationships with substances. Creation of safe space for disclosure and discussion of sensitive topics. Groups are small with 6-8 participants.
 - Isolation and loneliness can be noted in remote campus communities. Idea of dinner basket conversation brings people together and builds community connectedness.
 - Necessary to be vulnerable for learning and accessing support. Can be intimidating accessing the resources that are available. Peer mentors can play an important role.
- Concept on some campuses of who can eat the healthiest, “orthorexia”, and it becomes an obsession. Can be a status thing between students. Students can be separated by their financial ability to purchase this healthy food as well.
- It's got to be the value of food and the commitment to food that really needs to be written into the DNA of the institution. It would be neat to see the strategies that other institutions are using to bring that to the forefront.

- A lot of time and money drives decision making, so those of us in administration, we can advocate to bring this conversation to the forefront. There's an opportunity to bring together best practices from institutions.

Next Steps

- CARBC, CMHA-BC and Jessie's Legacy are interested in helping campuses move forward in this area.
- Engage campus groups around meaningful support in your context
- Develop, test and refine mechanisms that would promote healthy practices in your setting
- Participate in intercampus discussion and initiatives using the HM|HC group forum on this topic

Resources

- Healthy Relationships with Food and Substances on Campuses—Framework for Moving Forward
- Hosting a Dinner Basket Conversation on Substance Use
- A Guide to Community Conversation about Drinking Culture
- Campus Conversations about Healthy Living Blog

Continue the Conversation

- Join the online community platform community.healthycampuses.ca
- Join the group "Healthy Relationships with Food and Substances"

The screenshot shows the homepage of the online community platform. At the top, a teal banner reads "Continue the Conversation". Below this, there are "Sign In or Join Today" buttons for "Login" and "Join". The URL "community.healthycampuses.ca" is displayed in green. A navigation bar includes "HEALTHY MINDS", "HEALTHY CAMPUSES", and "SOCIAL LEARNING COMMUNITY". A user profile for "Shaylyn Matichine" is visible. The main content area features a group titled "Healthy Relationships With Food & Substances" with a description: "Food & Substance Use: Eating and substance use are associated with health issues on college campuses. Like sex and other feel good things in life, food and psychoactive substances change the way people feel. [...] Read More". The bottom navigation bar includes links for Home, Forum, Announcements, Events (0), Members (19), Send Invites, Subscribe, Email Options, Admin, and Leave Group.