

Abstract

Introduction:

Most people who inject drugs experience co-existing mental health disorders with depression and anxiety being the most prevalent. Fifty percent of people who inject drugs who are not treated for depression experience major depressive symptoms. Syringe service program design enables agencies to serve culturally diverse communities. Educating syringe service staff and volunteers on depression and anxiety screening to identify symptoms in people who inject drugs promotes linkages and closes gaps for mental health referral to improve outcomes.

Methods:

A pilot program using a pretest-posttest design was used to compare the effectiveness of depression, anxiety, and stress education to syringe service staff and volunteers; all who work in varying capacities at the syringe services program. The Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale was utilized to screen symptoms in people who inject drugs. A post-education impact survey was utilized to determine usefulness of training on knowledge.

Results:

Educational participants performed better on the posttest evaluation compared to pretest. Impacts in knowledge proved extremely useful, likewise was comfort in using the depression, anxiety, and stress scale. Staff administered screenings to ninety-one volunteer people who inject drugs at the syringe services site. Twenty-eight percent scored moderate level anxiety; seventeen percent scored moderate level depression. All screened individuals actively use substances which likely masked their symptoms of depression and anxiety.

Conclusions:

Educating syringe service staff and volunteers offers unique opportunities to identify depression and anxiety symptoms to provide people who inject drugs with linkages and close mental health gaps. Willingness of people who inject drugs to accept referral indicates that given easy access to mental health harm reduction, individuals would engage. Incorporating mental health screening and onsite referral into Standard Operating Procedure at needle exchange programs where relationships are formed would improve health outcomes and reduce health inequity in this population. Due to limited knowledge, more research is needed.

Keywords: People who inject drugs, syringe services program, depression, anxiety, screening