

Measuring and understanding quality of life in a young adult substance use program: Summary of key results

The focus of this study was to explore the definition and experience of quality of life among young adults accessing the Young Adult Substance Use Program (YA-SUP). The study was co-designed, co-facilitated, and co-interpreted with young adults with lived expertise.

Young adults have indicated that improvements in their quality of life are more important to their treatment than reducing their substance use or mental health symptoms. To measure quality of life in the YA-SUP, we use a 5-question measure called the MyLifeTracker. This measure was created for young people attending an outpatient mental health program in Australia (learn more here: <https://doi.org/10.2147/PRBM.S152342>). All young adults in the YA-SUP are asked to complete a survey before each appointment, which includes the MyLifeTracker questions adapted for the program. Specifically, young adults are asked:

How have you been feeling over the past 4 weeks in relation to your...

1. General well-being (emotional, physical, spiritual)
2. Day-to-day activities (study, work, leisure, self-care)
3. Relationships with friends
4. Relationships with family
5. Coping without substances (dealing with life, using your strengths)

☹️ 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 😊

The answers to these questions are used to understand what is important to young adults, help set goals and track progress, and evaluate the program. This study created space for young adults in the YA-SUP and their loved ones to comment on how their outcomes are being measured, used, and interpreted. For example, a key part of this study was to figure out if the MyLifeTracker questions capture the most important parts of quality of life to young people in the YA-SUP.

Based on survey responses of 100 young adults in the YA-SUP, the average MyLifeTracker score at the **first intake appointment was 3.7/10**. Of those who had attended follow-ups, we saw **significant improvements in quality of life scores at check-in 1, 2, and 3**. Between intake and check-in 3, the average improvement was +2.1 points.

This summary is based on preliminary, unpublished results. The study was funded by Frayme.

In this study, we conducted **12 interviews with young adults** and **2 focus groups with 9 parents** of young adults with substance use concerns to explore their definition of quality of life and how they responded to the MyLifeTracker questions. In general, **both young adults and parents thought the questions were meaningful and reflected what quality of life meant to them.** There were some suggestions to improve the measure (including missing topics like romantic relationships or basic needs, using a shorter time frame than past 4 weeks like today or past week, adding more examples like nutrition and eating to general wellbeing, and using the measure to set goals and think about the future). Below you will see **a visual summary** (created by a young adult) of the key points we heard in the interviews with young adults.

There was a difference between young adult's definitions of quality of life related to relationships, and parents' perceptions of what quality in relationships would look like to the young adults in their lives. Parents thought their young adult children placed much more importance on friendships than family. However, young adults provided in-depth reflections on how their families (and often parents) can have a large positive and/or negative impact on their quality of life. Parents may not realize how much their young adult children value and are impacted by family relationships. Based on our results, a young adult who participated in interviews and the YA-SUP created a summary of family characteristics based on the study results and a resource to help supporters start a conversation with their loved one about what they want and need (see the **poster/resource** below).

Overall, this study provides a deeper understanding of how young adults with substance use concerns define and experience quality of life. This study also offers suggestions for how to measure and track quality of life in outpatient programs in a way that is meaningful to young adults.

Thank you for participating! If you have any questions about the study, please contact the study lead, Jillian Halladay at halladje@mcmaster.ca.

DEFINITION OF QUALITY OF LIFE AMONG YOUNG ADULTS WITH SUBSTANCE USE CONCERNS



CHARACTERISTICS OF POSITIVE FAMILY CONNECTIONS AS DEFINED BY YOUNG ADULTS IN A SUBSTANCE USE PROGRAM

TALKING & SPENDING TIME TOGETHER DOING FAMILY ACTIVITIES

FEELING A MUTUAL CONNECTION

Feeling as though you care similarly for each other.

PHYSICAL & EMOTIONAL SAFETY

RESPECT & BOUNDARIES

OPEN, NON-JUDGMENTAL, NON-THREATENING COMMUNICATION

Some young adults feel like they need to lie and hide when they use substances due to feelings of shame and fear.

FREE FROM STIGMA

STABLE RELATIONSHIPS

FEELING TAKEN CARE OF

Mainly related to feeling emotionally supported. At times, also related to support with daily needs (e.g., finding a home, finances, household responsibilities).

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IT IS IMPORTANT TO REMEMBER THAT EVERY YOUNG ADULT IS UNIQUE. ASK THE YOUNG ADULT IN YOUR LIFE WHAT THEY NEED & WANT.

Consider making a support chart together. For example:

Feeling or Situation

What they need/want

How can I support?

Sad/Upset



- Space
- Talk about it
- Self care time

- Provide space
- Listen non-judgmentally
- Run a bath or make a tea

Happy



- To do something
- Hang out with friends
- Happiness causing cravings

- Suggest a family activity or help do something productive
- Let them see friends
- Provide praise for sobriety - say you are proud or keep up the good work & provide the opportunity for them to talk

Craving



- Need a distraction
- Avoid feeling and being alone

- Help find an engaging and distracting activity
- Be present
- Hold off judgement

What about while they are using? Feeling angry? Guilt or shame? Ask!