Maya Gupta investigates the role of family flexibility in early episode psychosis

2014-07-11

From Student Spotlight in Evidence Exchange Network for Mental Health and Addictions (EEnet)
Story by Pam Gillett, January 27, 2014
Photo by Eric Brousseau

Maya Gupta, a PhD student at Queens University, is exploring the role of family dynamics in early episode psychosis. Maya hopes her research will lead to more effective clinical interventions, helping families better support their loved ones with psychosis.

Maya completed her undergraduate degree in psychology at McMaster University. She also has engaged in community volunteer work, working closely with people who experience bipolar disorder and schizophrenia. Her interest in merging research and clinical practice to better meet the needs of people with these disorders has led to a broad range of research interests: behavioural treatments and functional outcomes in psychotic disorders, early intervention and prevention of psychosis, and family dynamics in early episode psychosis.

Under the guidance of Dr. Christopher Bowie, she received her Master's in Clinical Psychology from Queen’s University in 2011, earning the 2012 Best Master's Thesis Award from the Canadian Psychology Association. She is also the recipient of several scholarships for her research and academic standing, and has been nominated and awarded for her teaching skills by her students. Currently working on her PhD in Clinical Psychology at Queens, under the supervision of Dr. Bowie and supported by a CIHR Doctoral Research Award, Maya is focusing her research on family dynamics in early episode psychosis.

“I am interested in understanding the role of family flexibility in families with an individual with early episode psychosis,” says Maya. “What I mean by ‘family flexibility’ is the ability for members within a family unit to shift roles and responsibilities in response to stress. We know from the general family literature that families that are rigid are more likely to have higher levels of psychopathology and more family dysfunction than families that are flexible. I want to take a closer look at how family flexibility..."
impacts recovery from psychosis.”

With the aim of providing more specific guidance to families on how to best support their family member with psychosis, Maya’s research is addressing both a caregiver and a client need. She is recruiting patients and their families involved in the Heads Up Early Psychosis Intervention Program in Kingston. She is also building collaborative partnerships with other programs across southern Ontario. An immediate benefit to clients and families participating in Maya’s study? They have the option to have the results of their sessions provided back to them to share with their clinician.

“My project currently involves two related studies,” explains Maya. “The first is a self-report survey that gathers data from primary caregivers of an individual with psychosis, such as a parent or guardian, about their experiences of care-giving, use of support systems, coping strategies, and family satisfaction. The other is a laboratory-based study where I examine family flexibility in real time by having a person with early episode psychosis and their primary caregiver engage in a variety of family interaction tasks. Patient and caregiver factors, such as symptom severity or coping strategies, can be examined in relation to family flexibility.”

Examining family relationships in real time has not yet been applied to psychosis research, but it builds on the work of Dr. Tom Hollenstein, at Queen’s University. Dr. Hollenstein’s research agenda is to better understand how children develop socially and emotionally through adolescence by considering the dynamic interplay of biological and environmental factors in their lives. He has developed a tool to detect and analyze interpersonal flexibility (www.statespacegrids.org), and Maya is using this tool for the first time in early episode psychosis research.

“What I am hoping to do,” says Maya, “is to provide evidence on the type of caregiver and client factors that can help families best support their loved ones with psychosis. By disentangling the important components in these complex and dynamic relationships, we aim to help clinicians improve family therapy and support.

Maya intends to continue her research in the area of family functioning in psychosis. She plans to disseminate her work through publications and conferences, as well as in the community, to clinicians, clients, and families.

“I am very excited about my work but want to emphasize that good research doesn’t happen in isolation, says Maya. “I am appreciative of the people who helped make this project possible and would like to thank Dr. Christopher Bowie, Dr. Tom Hollenstein, and Dr. Patricia Minnes, for their guidance, expertise, and insightful feedback, and Jessica Lougheed, Tanya Tran, Mariana Borsuk-Gudz, and Sarah Cassidy for their ongoing support with this project.”

For more information about this study contact Maya at maya.gupta@queensu.ca

Click here to read the article on EEnet