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UFDA – District Functional Unit for Adolescents 2022: a pilot project in Italy to detect mental health strengths and difficulties among youths

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Abstract

Introduction: The COVID-19 pandemic took a toll on young people's mental health, exacerbating the already increasing rates of psychological distress rates worldwide. The Italian Veneto region funded a specialized unit for youth (UFDA) within Child and Adolescent Mental Health services (CAMHs), aimed to address the transition issues between CAMHs and adult mental health services resulting in high drop-out rates and discontinuation of care. This study examines the profile of patients seeking help, explores the agreement between caregivers and patients regarding their difficulties, assesses the effectiveness of interventions offered by the UFDA of AULSS6 based on follow-up questionnaire data.

Methods: The study involved 255 youths aged 12 to 24 years (mean age = 14.4 years) and 170 caregivers. Pre- and follow-up assessments were conducted using both the self and informant report versions of the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ). Patient profiling was based on the anamnestic data collected by the case manager and an initial participation survey completed by the patient upon entry.

Results: The majority of patients were Italian females, with half of the sample attending high school. Many reported feelings of loneliness, a diminished quality of life, and intrusive suicidal or self-harm thoughts. The study found high rates of parent referrals and self-referrals, with varied distress duration and severity. SDQ data showed significant improvements in all scales except for the Prosocial Behavior scale. The agreement between caregivers and patients was moderate to low, with caregivers generally reporting fewer difficulties.

Conclusions: This study highlights the importance of youth-centered services in addressing the mental health needs of youth in distress, which can fill the treatment gap and ease the transition to adult services in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. The UFDA can serve as a template that could be replicated in other regions or countries facing similar mental health challenges among youth.