Identifying Interest in and Barriers to Psychiatric Genetic Counseling

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Mental illness is common in the United States and genetic counseling for psychiatric indications can help individuals understand multifactorial inheritance, recurrence risk estimates, and identify ways to protect their future mental health. Despite interest in and efficacy of the service documented in populations outside of the United States, individuals with personal and/or family histories of psychiatric conditions are very rarely accessing psychiatric genetic counseling services. The purpose of our study was to identify interest in and barriers to psychiatric genetic counseling with the hopes of better characterizing this population and improving access to this beneficial service in the future. An online survey was developed to assess exposure to genetic counseling, perceived causes of psychiatric conditions, and level of interest in, reasons for, and barriers to psychiatric genetic counseling. Individuals with self-reported personal and/or family histories of any mental illness were invited to participate via emails and advertisements to local Houston support groups, psychiatry and maternal fetal medicine clinics, and other platforms. Categorical variables were compared using contingency tests. Overall, 87% of respondents reported being extremely, very, or somewhat interested in psychiatric genetic counseling. There was no significant difference in the level of interest in psychiatric genetic counseling for individuals with a family history of serious mental illness, such as schizophrenia, when compared to those with a family history of any type of mental illness. Similarly, degree of relation and number of affected family members was not associated with significant differences in the level of interest. Any patient with a personal and/or a family history of any type of psychiatric condition(s) may be interested in and benefit from this service. The most common reasons for interest in psychiatric genetic counseling were “to understand more about the condition” and “recurrence risk” (71% and 66% of respondents respectively). The most common perceived barriers to psychiatric genetic counseling were “cost/insurance coverage” and “time” (80% and 38% of respondents respectively). This study provides important insight into this population, confirms interest levels reported by prior studies, and provides information for genetic counselors and other providers interested in increasing access to psychiatric genetic counseling.

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