

Young people's return to services after relapse: challenges and opportunities

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Introduction: Relapse is common after young people leave intensive residential alcohol and other drug (AoD) services. However, little attention has been given to how young people conceptualise relapse, and hence how they re-engage with services.

Method: We draw on two waves of a longitudinal qualitative study conducted with a sample of 38 young people from several states in Australia. Interviews were conducted approximately six and 12 months after participants left intensive AoD services. Transcripts were analysed thematically.

Key Findings: Young people tended to regard ongoing substance use as to be expected. Some planned service return to pre-empt relapse. Others regarded it as warranted when their substance use felt out of control, or to deal with a different substance. They generally described service return as an opportunity to utilise a helpful resource and reconnect with supportive workers, rather than a marker of failure. Second and subsequent visits to rehabilitation services offered them new insights on themselves and their AoD use, particularly when a different program was accessed, enabling them to feel more confident in managing their lives going forward.

Discussions and Conclusions: An extensive literature critiques notions of relapse, arguing that it is based in a disease model and is reliant on avoidance goals. However, here relapse was understood as a part of long-term substance use goals, and something which could be managed with the help of residential services. This study underlines the importance of ongoing access to AoD services in young people's efforts to manage substance use within complex lives.

Practice or policy implications: Young people tend to regard managing AoD use as part of a broader project of trying to live well, so services should support them to work towards broad life goals. Sustained connections with workers after leaving programs help young people reengage if they need to.

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