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Distance learning can open new doors for mentally ill

Education via the Internet has been shown to help those with schizophrenia boost their self-esteem and improve their lives

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Thoughts of navigating through crowded university hallways is enough to keep many people with mental illness from pursuing their education.

But a former Lethbridge man who has a mental illness and earned degrees both the conventional way and through distance education says the Internet can be a great fit for people who cannot cope with brick and mortar classrooms.

Austin Mardon, 43, has lived in Edmonton for some time. An internationally known geographer, Mardon was diagnosed with schizophrenia 13 years ago.

A few months ago, Mardon submitted an abstract to the Mental Health Research Showcase called Distance Learning at the Post Secondary Level: an Opportunity for the Mentally ill. His three case studies included himself (he earned a Ph.D. in geography via Greenwich University online); a man with schizophrenia who earned a Bachelor of Commerce degree through Athabasca University, and a third man with schizophrenia who earned a Bachelor of General Studies degree, also from Athabasca.

"The one fellow was very ill but after he got his Bachelor of Commerce degree, he managed to get a full-time job and is actually off AISH (Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped) completely," says Mardon.

"There are multiple elements that will improve self-esteem immediately."

It's the flexibility of the virtual classroom that works so well for many people with mental illness. Deadlines are not as tight, for one, and the person is able to work from home in a non-threatening environment.

But there are downsides.

"It's not for everybody," Mardon says. "The disadvantage is you have to be really self-motivated. You have to want it and you have to be disciplined."

The other drawback - which exists in the mainstream as well - is student loans still have to be paid back, even if a student doesn't complete the studies.

Diane Herrick, chapter director of the Lethbridge Schizophrenia Society, agrees distance learning can offer benefits for those with the illness.

"I've known a couple of people who've done this," Herrick says. "And it allows them to work more at their own pace. Crowds can be a big issue for some people and it can be very overwhelming to be at a university where there are thousands and thousands of students.

"It doesn't work for everyone, however, because some of the medications people have to take can cause a lack of motivation. You do have to be very motivated. I also know of a few who started, but never finished."

Herrick said the society, in partnership with Eli-Lilly pharmaceuticals, has a grant program students can apply for every year to have all costs associated with one of their courses paid for.

Before Mardon's diagnosis, his academic and personal life was blooming. He'd spent time as part of an international expedition (1986) to Antarctica studying meteorites 170 kilometres from the South Pole. He's a space researcher, world explorer and tireless advocate for people with schizophrenia, but because of his illness and the effects of medication, he lives on the limited income AISH provides.

Recently, though, he became a part-time instructor for two online universities.

While earning a degree can lead to improvements in life for some, too often the schizophrenic can end up in a state of despair.

It's estimated homeless schizophrenics constitute .06 per cent of any given population, Mardon says, which means about 600 people in a city the size of Edmonton are dysfunctional and living on the streets.

The reason, Mardon believes, is people stop taking their medications. Numbing side-effects are the reason for some. Others stop because they feel better on their medication, which leads them to incorrectly assume they no longer need it. Mardon, who believes it's the civic duty of schizophrenics to take their medication, says the government should add Consta - an injectable anti-psychotic that lasts for two weeks - to the provincial drug list.

"I'm involved in a study with the University of Alberta right now," Mardon said. "I have noticed a world of difference. It is like I am a new man. How many 1,900 homeless schizophrenics in Alberta could be saved from the nightmare of psychosis by getting this new drug?"

Even though Consta involves only two injections a month, the cost is about \$500 a month.

Mardon says by adding it to the provincial drug list, the province would save enormous societal and health-care system costs in the long run.

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