

Recognizing the priority of Youth Mental Health Chronicle Herald op-ed

(May 7, 2008) Recognizing the need to enhance awareness about mental health issues facing young people, Canada is celebrating the second National Child and Youth Mental Health Day during Mental Health Week (May 5-11).

The adolescent years are a critical period of adjustment for both youth and families. Young people go through many physical changes during adolescence, as well as many mental and emotional changes. Mental disorders commonly onset in young people and according to the World Health Organization they contribute almost one-third of the global burden of disease during the adolescent years. In Canada, between 15 and 20 percent of youth suffer from a mental disorder that would benefit from appropriate care although accurate and up-to-date information on the scope of this issue is lacking in a Canadian context. Early and effective identification and intervention for young people suffering from mental illness is essential because as many as half of all lifetime cases onset before 14 years of age and 70 percent by age 24. Although effective treatments for many of these disorders are known, for a variety of reasons they are often not readily accessible to or accessed by young people who need them.

We also need to promote mental health and try to prevent the onset of mental disorders based on the best available evidence. Currently one of the best approaches to enhance the mental well-being of youth is to provide needed educational and social supports – often through the family, the school system, the workplace or community organizations.

As parents and as community members it is important to be aware and understand how youth develop, the challenges that young people face, and the ways in which family can help them stay as physically and mentally healthy as possible. Usually, it is parents who are amongst the first to notice that something beyond the usual challenges of being a teenager is happening to their child. But often they do not know what the problem may be or what to do about it. Sometimes the family and personal stress that the problem causes can negatively affect family harmony, the relationship between partners and relations at work. Often, parents are struggling with their own mental health concerns that further tax their coping resources. So figuring out what the problem may be and getting the right kind of help in an effective and timely manner may be of value, not only to the young person, but also to his or her parent(s) and family. Talking to youth about the issue of mental health can be difficult, but it is the best way to understand what they are going through and if they need to get help.

At school mental health problems can be equally challenging for children and adolescents. For many youth the transition to new academic and social environments such as high school, college or university, can be difficult and can create stress that they are ill-equipped to deal with. Additionally, youth at this age are beginning to experiment with drugs and alcohol and are also beginning to engage in other risk-taking activity, making that transition even harder. Learning to cope with these changes and build resilience is an important part of being successful in school; especially given that some of the most serious forms of mental illness emerge early in adolescence. Many secondary schools are now faced with the task of dealing with student problems, including those that affect their mental health, but most schools do not supply students with the necessary support to help them address this transitional stage. One way to enhance the mental health of young people is to teach educators how to identify and appropriately refer students who may be experiencing mental health problems. Ideally, this is facilitated by strong partnerships between schools and service providers.

The workplace also provides an important domain in which mental health literacy can be advanced to meet the needs of the working parent, the parent's child/family and the employer concurrently. It is important for working parents to be well informed about mental disorders and their treatment so that they can advocate for the best outcomes for their children and themselves. Enhancing mental health literacy of working parents and their children may promote mental health and well-being, improve early recognition of mental disorders, enhance appropriate early use of health services and lead to better health, social and economic outcomes for all.

The home, school and workplace are all important environments where the mental health of youth can be advanced, but none of these environments can hope to succeed without federal and provincial support. The recent establishment of the Mental Health Commission of Canada is a step in the right direction, as is the recent report (*Reaching for the Top*) by Dr Kellie Leitch which establishes a blueprint of recommendations for child and youth mental health care. But despite these advances, child and youth mental health care is still not high on many provincial or federal government agendas.

In Canada, only four of ten provinces have created child and youth mental health policies/plans and there is no national child and youth mental health policy. Furthermore, only one in five of Canadian young people requiring mental health care receive it. Clearly the situation must change. Mental health care for young Canadians is a right, not a privilege. What would happen in this country if only one in five adults needing hip or new replacements received them? Or how would we react if 15 to 20 percent of our young people suffered from cardiac disease? The access and treatment to mental health services should be no different for children and youth with mental health problems! The time has come to carefully explore legislating access to timely mental health assessment and care based on the rights of children and youth.

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