

CANADA'S BATTLE AGAINST MENTAL HEALTH-RELATED STIGMA AND DISCRIMINATION: MAKING A DIFFERENCE IN THE CLASSROOM

The Provincial Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health at CHEO

A world without stigma would be...

A world of peace and equality where positive energy and happiness would be in abundance

A world where acceptance and helping comes naturally

A world where everyone is included, where differences are not boundaries

A world of unity and the importance of being unique

These words, penned by a group of student artists, describe the inspiration behind an original mural they created just a few short years ago. It now holds a place of honour at the Provincial Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health at the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario (CHEO) where it serves as a constant reminder that a world without stigma is much more than a dream. It is an absolute necessity if we wish to give every child and youth the best possible opportunity to thrive.

According to the Mental Health Commission of Canada,

Stigma refers to the negative and prejudicial ways in which people living with mental illness are labeled. Often that means being labeled as nothing more than the disease itself. Stigma is an internal attitude and belief held by an

individual, often about a minority group such as people with mental illness.

Discrimination refers to the way people living with mental illness are treated, intentionally or unintentionally, due to stigma. People with mental illness are often treated with disrespect, experiencing such behaviours as exclusion, bullying, aggression, ridicule and devaluation. Such discrimination can result in limits and barriers to many of life's opportunities.

Between 15 and 20 percent of children and youth suffer from some kind of mental health problem, yet only one in six actually get the help they so desperately need. There are many factors contributing to this startling lack of support for child and youth mental health problems, but widespread stigma and discrimination are among the most stubborn and complex. They affect individuals and groups across the lifespan, prevent people from seeking life-saving help and feed feelings of shame and self-blame. Stigma and discrimination prevent people – young and old alike – from achieving their potential and living life to the fullest.

In Canadian society, there are few refuges from stigma and discrimination. Families, groups, organizations, workplaces, health care services and schools each inflict their own brand of isolation and stereotyping on people with mental health issues.



Photo credit: 2006 Mural Artists – Claire Brascoupé, Alan Hay, Sébastien Lemire-Mulato, Angéliqua Pauzé – led by Adam Davidson of the Ottawa School of Art.

Untangling these problems to get to the root of the problem will not be an easy task. So where do we start?

There is growing evidence that schools, with their central role in the lives of young people, families and communities, are an ideal setting to start shaping a world without stigma. The classroom is a perfect place to reach large numbers of children and youth with information and programs specially designed to foster healthy attitudes and behaviours related to mental illness. Research indicates that young brains are far from set in their ways, and so childhood and adolescence present us with a window of opportunity through which we can do much more than improve the school community. School based programs may also give us power to shape neighbourhoods, cities, provinces and ultimately the entire country.

While many schools are already tuned in to the problems of stigma and discrimination as they relate to race, ethnicity and sexual orientation, mental health and illness remain relatively invisible. This is not surprising, as the same trend can be easily observed in society as a whole.

Despite the enormous potential of school-based programs targeting mental health-related stigma and discrimination, there is scant evidence to tell us what they ought to look like, when we should deliver them and how to measure their impact. The Mental Health Commission of Canada has identified children and youth as one of two key target groups for their national anti-stigma campaign (the other is health-care professionals), yet even they are struggling to identify approaches that do more than increase knowledge and shape attitudes. To effectively address stigma and discrimination, we must also find a way to change the harmful discriminatory behaviours that children and youth carry into adulthood.

So how do we do it? To answer that question, the Centre embarked on a systematic review of the evidence surrounding school-based interventions aimed at reducing or eliminating stigma and discrimination based on mental health. The review failed to identify a magic solution, but prompted a subsequent gathering of international experts in Toronto, where a full range of stakeholders discussed promising practices. They also pledged to move forward with a cooperative research agenda that would provide practical evidence that can be put to use in schools across Canada and around the world.

Experts generally agree that there is no time to waste when trying to prevent or reverse the development of discriminatory thoughts and behaviours. It is important to reach young children with age-appropriate interventions that lay the foundation upon which more complex and specific programs can be built. A six-year-old child won't likely benefit from a lecture about the signs and symptoms of depression, but an ongoing discussion about a wide spectrum of feelings could help them understand how behaviours and emotions are inextricably linked.

Experts also agree that we can't discount the human factor in anti-stigma and anti-discrimination efforts. Simply teaching children and youth about mental health issues isn't enough. We must bring facts and statistics to life by encouraging age-appropriate personal contact with people who can reinforce the messages being discussed. Regular interaction with a person living with mental health problems may give older children and youth a more complete understanding of the issues and feelings they deal with every day.

School-based anti-stigma and anti-discrimination approaches also have the added benefit of helping with early identification and treatment of mental health problems in children and youth. A coordinated and strategic effort to fight stigma and discrimination in schools would make it easier for students to ask for help and encourage teachers and other school personnel to provide healthy and effective supports when they do.

Of course, stigma and discrimination present bigger problems than any individual, school or profession can solve. Teachers, support staff, administrators, parents, board staff, governments, mental health professionals and community services each have a role to play in creating a world without stigma.

At the Centre, we have developed a number of resources that schools and teachers can use to fight stigma and discrimination in their classrooms and beyond.

The Dare to Dream Program

At the Centre, we have learned that students themselves are often the greatest champions for mental health awareness, yet their initiative and creativity remain a largely untapped resource. In Ontario, young people and mentors are encouraged to learn more about the Dare to Dream program (daretodreamprogram.ca), which provides up to \$5,000 for student-led projects aimed to raise awareness about mental health issues in schools and communities.

YooMagazine.net

YooMagazine.net is an interactive health and mental health literacy program designed for young people, parents and teachers. Developed by Dr. Darcy Santor at the Centre, YooMagazine.net recognizes that there is no health without mental health. By treating mental health issues in exactly the same way as it treats nutrition, exercise, and smoking, the online resource is helping to bridge the acceptance gap between physical and mental health problems.

YooMagazine.net improves health literacy and decision making among young people by providing them with accurate health and mental health information in a variety of formats. The tool also gives participating schools the ability to assess student health needs through an annual online survey. The anonymous and



school-specific results can serve as a snapshot of student health needs and emerging trends.

The New Mentality

The New Mentality is a youth engagement project the Centre supports in partnership with Children's Mental Health Ontario. Groups of youth from around the province are connecting with adult partners and each other to create a dynamic and sustainable network that will raise awareness of child and youth mental health issues and reduce the stigma associated with them.

Speak Up!

Speak Up! About Stigma and Mental Illness is a classroom resource currently under development at the Centre. It is designed to introduce students in Grades 7 and 8 to the concept of stigma and how stigma relates to mental illness. Speak Up! consists of a four-part presentation accompanied by an extensive teaching guide that features background information, curricular fits, speaking notes, activities and links to additional resources. Speak up! is being piloted in a handful of Ontario schools and should be widely available later this year.

Mental health is everyone's business. The majority of Canadians will be touched by mental health difficulties at some point in their lives, and so we all have a responsibility to do our part to ensure they are treated with respect and dignity. The stigma and discrimination associated with mental health problems interfere with our ability to effectively prioritize mental health issues on the public agenda and provide critical help to those in need. While school-based efforts will not solve the problem, they represent an unparalleled opportunity to shape a Canada – and a world – without stigma.

About the Author

The Provincial Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health at the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario (CHEO) brings people and knowledge together to promote the best mental health for every child and youth. We are helping to build a stronger mental health care system – from prevention to intensive intervention – by expanding the knowledge, capacity and partnerships that are needed to support it. For information, visit www.onthepoint.ca.

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