

MENTAL HEALTH – THE NEXT EQUITY ISSUE?

Emily Noble | President of the Canadian Teachers' Federation

While reading an article in the Ottawa Citizen I was struck by the following statistic by Ron Holder, psychology professor at Queen's University:

... [the] suicide rate among Canadians aged 14 to 21 has tripled over the past five decades, from about six deaths per 100,000 people to 19.¹

This statistic is a haunting reminder that the issue of mental illness is a very real and serious one – 1 in 5 Canadians are afflicted with a mental disorder.

As a teacher, former principal, and elected representative of the Canadian Teachers' Federation, like many of you, I've become aware of some of the more common mental disorders affecting our student population.

Self-esteem and the sense of self define the teen years in particular. This is a time of joyful discovery, independence, emotional and physical growth. Yet for some, it is a time when mental disorders may start to surface in a more apparent manner and sometimes mistakenly be attributed to puberty, hormones, and environmental factors. If you add to this the daily pressures from peers, parents, the media, and society in general, you may find that some youth are living in less than favourable environments which can lead to devastating circumstances. Many of these youth can end up misunderstood, labeled 'different' and become isolated from the mainstream student population. What a terrible way to live through the seemingly wonderful years of self-discovery.

Many of you will have known students who have been afflicted by mental disorders. I know I have and at times, I've felt powerless to understand and to help; frustrated that I could not do more or easily empathize. Other times, I was a source of support over-championing seemingly small feats for some, but in reality they were huge achievements for those who suffer silently.

It makes us wonder why a student should suffer in silence and isolation. The Canadian Mental Health Association defines the term "stigma" as "any attribute, trait or disorder that causes a person to be labelled as unacceptably different from 'normal' people."²

But why and how does stigma happen? According to Merinda Epstein, Australian teacher for disadvantaged children and mental health advocate, "all stigma is based to some degree on ignorance,

on social control, on intolerance, on our social inclination to group people in ways which allow us to find an order in a complex world and to some degree in our personal preparedness as social beings to protect our own mental health by defining others as essentially different from ourselves."³

As teachers, we can help break down the barriers between isolation and integration and support. First steps towards lessening the stigma are awareness and information. There are a few excellent resources at our disposal; we simply need to know where to find them. We can also seek the help and support of our school guidance counselors, our school boards and our teacher locals, who can help us to locate resources and supporting community groups.

While I may not be aware of all the resources available, a couple of them have crossed my path, which I think are worth mentioning.

*Talking About Mental Illness*⁴ is an awareness program that has been proven to bring about positive change in students' knowledge and attitudes about mental illness. While it is Ontario based with links to both curriculum and supporting community groups, it is definitely worth a look since it is easily adaptable. "Maybe it would help to educate the public, rather than focusing on the actual depressed people – opening the minds of those who aren't depressed so that they're not so judgmental and closed-minded."⁵

*When Something's Wrong*⁶ is a handbook for teachers designed to help you understand and implement ways to help children with behaviour problems that are due to common mental disorders. In some cases, behavioural disturbances within the classroom can be temporary, yet sometimes they may reflect a mental disorder. This quick-reference resource offers brief descriptions of some of the possible classroom behaviours you may experience as a teacher, and suggested strategies to help you deal with these issues in the classroom.

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3 Epstein, Merinda, B.Ed., *A Consumer Activist's Guide to Mental Health in Australia*, May 1995, www.takver.com/epstein/articles/one_stigma_or_many.htm

4 Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, *Talking About Mental Illness; A guide for developing an awareness program for youth, Teacher's Resource*, Toronto, 2001, www.camh.net

5 Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, *Hear Me, Understand Me, Support Me: What young women want you to know about depression*, Toronto, 2006, www.camh.net

6 Canadian Psychiatric Research Foundation, *When Something's Wrong, Ideas for Teachers*, Toronto, www.cprf.ca

1 Tam, Pauline, *Lessons to Learn*, Ottawa Citizen, Saturday, May 3, 2008, A1.

2 Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, *Talking About Mental Illness; A guide for developing an awareness program for youth, Teacher's Resource*, Toronto, 2001, www.camh.net

Diamond Award

The Diamond Award is the highest level QDPE award presented to schools. Diamond Award schools provide all students with an exceptional program of physical education instruction every day of the school week, for the entire school year. A Diamond school provides a minimum of 150 minutes of class instruction each week and meets all criteria set out in the award application form.

Platinum Award

The Platinum Award is presented to schools that provide all students with a well-planned program of physical education instruction three to four times a week for the entire school year. Platinum Award schools provide a minimum of 150 minutes of class instruction each week and meet all criteria set out in the award application form.

Gold Award

The Gold Award recognizes the same level of quality programs as the Diamond and Platinum Award; however students receive

less than the CAHPERD recommended physical education class time (150 minutes per week). Gold Award schools provide a minimum of 100 minutes, three times per week for the entire school year and meet all criteria set out in the award application form. The Gold Award is considered as a “stepping stone” to the Platinum and Diamond Award.

Last year, more than 1100 schools received this national award and each year the numbers continue to rise.

About the Organization

2008 marks 75 years of history for CAHPERD since launching in 1933 as the Canadian Physical Education Association (CPEA). CAHPERD is pleased to be embarking upon its 75th year as a charitable, voluntary-sector organization whose primary concern is to influence the healthy development of children and youth by advocating for quality, school-based physical and health education.

For more information, please visit: www.cahperd.ca

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The Canadian Teachers' Federation wholeheartedly endorses the goal of the Mental Health Commission of Canada – to enhance the health and social outcomes for Canadians living with mental health problems and illnesses. One of the Commission's three objectives to meet that goal is the establishment of a Knowledge Exchange Centre to improve cross-sector communication about mental health and mental illness for all Canadians.⁷

As a spokesperson for the teaching profession and tireless advocate for students and teachers, I welcome this ambitious initiative to ensure we have the necessary resources at our disposal to bring about change and have a positive impact on the lives of those youth who suffer silently and live on the margins of the student population. Chances are you know someone, perhaps even a loved one, who lives with the burden of mental illness. Help us to help those who need it most.

⁷ www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/mhcc.html

John Maher's⁸ poem *Invisible Man* seems to accurately reflect the plight of the mental health victim.

In living rooms and public places,
In street and square, in church,
You may freely come and go –
Stroll, loiter and pray,
Just as long as you behave
Just as long as you remain
A presence to yourself alone.
Reasonable people all agree
The rule must be applied:
Don't ask, don't tell,
Don't advertise. Be invisible!
Oh, be invisible when you walk
among us.
Don't stand out.
Don't give us cause to notice you.
Don't ask us to approve:
if you must love, don't let it show;
live, but do not let us know.
Be like us in every way:
Pale and male and gray.
Oh, be invisible!

⁸ Briggs, Dennie, *What Would a Poet Know About Psychology?* March 2004, www.pettarchiv.org.uk/pubs-dbriggs-poetand.pdf