

# HEALTHY MINDS, BRIGHT FUTURES. CAMPAIGN WILL ADDRESS MENTAL HEALTH OF CHILDREN AND YOUTH

Jonathan Teghtmeyer | Alberta Teachers' Association

*"I'm not going to make it until Monday morning."*

Edmonton teacher Sherry Robbins vividly recalls the day that a student informed her that life was no longer worth living. Robbins, alone in the school with the student, did not know where to turn for help. "It was five o'clock on a Friday afternoon and there was nobody, absolutely nobody [around]," says Robbins.

This was not the only time that Robbins has been asked to help a suicidal teen – it happened at least three other times. In the case of one young man, Robbins wishes that the student had reached out to a teacher before committing suicide. "My heart still aches; if only I could have helped him."

Being suicidal is likely the most critical mental health issue that a student will experience; many students will face depression and eating disorders; others harm themselves or abuse drugs or alcohol. In fact, the *Journal of American Academy of Child Psychiatry* states that as many as one in five teenagers have experienced a major mental disorder.

"Students are subject to a lot of pressures – social pressures and image pressures," says Tom Shand, executive director of the Alberta division of the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA). "There are many different disorders that become evident in teens."

According to the Canadian Psychiatric Association, teenagers and young adults aged 15–24 experience the highest incidence of mental disorders of any age group in Canada, and teachers are often the first to pick up on the early warning signs of mental illness. That is why the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA) and the CMHA have launched the campaign Healthy Minds, Bright Futures. The partners plan to raise awareness, encourage advocacy and reduce stigma for students affected by mental illness.

The campaign will feature a booklet entitled *Compassionate classrooms: understanding students affected by mental illness*, which will be distributed to every teacher in Alberta in April. The booklet will offer teachers vital information on common mental illnesses affecting children and youth. In addition to describing symptoms and causes, the booklet will dispel common myths about mental illness and provide teachers with assessment tools and resources to make referrals for students who may need assistance.

Dick Southworth is the executive vice-president of the CMHA and a former Calgary teacher. "We have a very well-developed education department, and we are in a position to provide programs on mental health issues, including suicide prevention, to any group that wants them, schools in particular," says Southworth.

As a former local president of the ATA's Calgary Public Teachers local, Southworth is enthusiastic about the partnership. "Teachers are trained as professional observers of child behaviour and have an opportunity to identify problems that children may have and relay those concerns to parents."

The partnership will also be evident at some teachers' conventions this year, where CMHA regional officers will be guests at the ATA booth, where they will be available to discuss mental health issues with teachers. Future editions of the ATA News will feature mental health related articles and resources.

ATA locals are encouraged to become involved with the regional offices of the CMHA. Grants are available for locals to engage in community activities that advocate for the mental health of children and youth.

The Association's advocacy work will culminate with a provincewide billboard and poster campaign designed to discourage stigma, and to promote teachers and students working together for healthy minds and bright futures.

Most students who develop a mental illness can successfully return to school and live normal and productive lives, provided they receive help and support. Many students continue their education while receiving treatment.

Sherry Robbins knows the value of supportive teachers in students' lives. It is at school that students develop learning skills as well as skills for achieving positive peer relationships and emotional well-being. "In some situations, the teacher is the only stable adult in a child's life. Simply listening to the student can go a long way to alleviate their pain," she says.

Fortunately for the student that came to Robbins on that Friday evening, Robbins was there to listen and support her through the weekend until more help was available.

## About the Author

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