

By Tom Shand

Can we talk?

Three little words that can mean so much and possibly even save a life.

For that reason, this is the message being delivered jointly by the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) and Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA) in schools across Alberta.

When a young person breaks an arm or is burning up with fever, whether at home, at school, or in the community; there is seldom a question of what course of action needs to be taken. Most physical ailments are like that. Nobody wants them but neither are people afraid to seek help in order to get better.

Unfortunately, most instances of mental illness are not looked upon the same way by most people. They are too often seen as a sign of individual weakness or some type of character flaw. It is not that people purposely want to malign others but mental illness is largely misunderstood and therefore either mistreated or ignored.

This is difficult enough for adults, with lived experience to help them cope, but it can be even more so for youth, who are dealing with many changes and pressures and have not yet developed the skills to put personal issues in perspective.

Experiences of youth are critical. The roots of mental illness and the first signs of their emergence most often occurs during one's youth. It is estimated that more than 15 per cent of young Canadians will experience mental illness – or about five students in a given class of 30. It is a serious problem not only because of the numbers of people it affects - youth and their families and friends – but also in its potential severity as suicide is the second leading cause of death for those between ages 15 and 24.

The good news is that recovery is very achievable, to various degrees, for most people living with mental illness. Discovery and diagnosis are key. For most people, the sooner help is sought the better the chances for a speedier and more complete recovery.

For young people, symptoms of potential mental illness can often be dismissed as bad moods, reactions to bad experiences, the impact of living in tough environments or various social circumstances or school experiences.

For example, symptoms of depression in youth can include:

- Lack of motivation for an extended period of time.
- Persistent feels of hopelessness or helplessness
- Loss of interest in activities previously enjoyed.
- Disruption to sleep patterns.

- Talk or thoughts of suicide.
- Physical symptoms such as fatigue or headaches.

It is certainly part of life to experience anger, sadness and frustration as responses to stimuli or life circumstances. However, when large changes in moods or behaviour extend for longer than two weeks, there is a good chance that something has changed in that person and he or she may need help. “Can we talk?” is a good place to start in encouraging that person to seek help and letting one know he or she is not alone and it is okay to talk about it. You don’t have to be an expert to be a good listener or to open the door to help. It is normal for people to feel uncomfortable or frightened talking about personal issues so it is important to create an environment where they feel safe doing so.

So what causes mental illness? There is no single cause but usually a complex interplay of factors affecting a person’s mental health. Triggers include: chemical imbalances in the brain, psychological and social factors and genetics. Prolonged severe stress and/or traumatic events, such as child abuse and violence can often lead to mental illness, although a person may not be immediately symptomatic.

In Alberta, Alberta Health Services recognizes the importance of reaching people at a young age, both in treating mental illness and in creating a better understanding of mental health and mental illness.

Given how much time that young people spend in school and the tremendous influence of their fellow students and teachers, the CMHA was delighted to be approached by the ATA to work together to help overcome stigma and increase understanding of mental illness in our school through the “Healthy Minds, Bright Futures” program.

By increasing understanding and increasing enlightenment, discussion of mental illness will help it emerge from the shadows thereby fostering an emerging attitude of hope which is so critical to recovery. “Can we talk?” – three little words that can mean so much.

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