

Reducing stigma and improving access to mental health care for youth

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BC youth have been estimated to have a relatively high—15%—prevalence of mental health disorders.¹ Even more alarmingly, disease onset occurred before 18 years of age in 70% of Canadian adults living with mental illness.² Youth are among the most susceptible groups for mental health problems, yet are poorly equipped to recognize disorders and most likely to seek help from each other.³

We formed the Healthy Young Minds Project in October 2009. The project's mission is to “establish a sustainable framework for engaging youth in the discussion of mental health with the aims of reducing stigma and facilitating access to mental health care” through the creation and delivery of workshops in Vancouver high schools.

The project ran focus groups with teens at a Vancouver high school to find out what youth know about mental health and illness. “We don’t know how they feel,” was one of many frustrated answers to the question, “What is mental health and what does it mean to have a mental illness?”

A qualitative review of our results has revealed that youth understand that mental health is a broad, complicated topic and that they have a great desire to learn—but they have trouble



The Healthy Young Minds Project team at a brainstorming session.

sorting out facts from misinformation. The above quote, in particular, shows that mental illness—at least in peer discussions—is largely viewed as a remote problem that afflicts other people who have foreign, unknown feelings. This view may reflect how teenagers see the world, and that part of growing up is realizing that these “others” could very easily be us. The unfortunate reality is that, for some youth, insight may come too late. It may even result in them falling under the radar of mental health service providers.

Ms Williams, a member of the Healthy Young Minds team, recently met a patient, Mr X, during a family practice placement. He was new to the practice and was seeking a physician to help him manage issues related to depression and anxiety. Currently in his mid-30s, he disclosed that he has been suffering silently for more than 10 years, afraid of the stigma an official diagnosis would bring.

Mr X indicated that his illness lim-

its his social life and prevents engagement in work and school activities. Talking to Ms Williams was the first time he had discussed his problems with anyone in the health care system. Near the end of the interview he seemed more relaxed, perhaps relieved, as our colleague thanked him for sharing his story while reassuring him that he is not alone in dealing with these difficulties.

Ms Williams’s encounter illustrates how, despite being severely impacted, a person with mental illness can feel alone and afraid to share his experience for many years. Listening to him share his story and serving as the first contact in the health care system was a relieving and humbling experience for a future physician. Coming to the doctor’s office was an important first step, one that Healthy Young Minds would like to see happen earlier in the course of mental illnesses.

Healthy Young Minds aims to increase awareness of mental health and illness so that others like Mr X

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know that it is okay to admit to having these problems. People with mental health issues should not have to face the barriers of stigma and misinformation while suffering in silence.

We have been inspired early in our medical training by a common passion for reducing disparities and providing young people with the tools to not only access mental health resources, but also to emphasize the importance of addressing mental health through self-care practices.

One major strength of our project is that it focuses on integrating expert knowledge with what youth already know and would like to know. We are currently compiling and evaluating results from four focus groups with students in grades 9, 10, 11, and 12. These results will complement information from advice from local mental health experts, peer-reviewed literature, and resources from government agencies in the development of pilot mental health workshops for grade 10 students.

In the pilot project this year, we hope to not only stimulate discussion, but also to educate youth on the topics of mental health and self-care practices. We hope that youth will benefit from both the information we will present and from the interaction with

positive role models. Above all we believe that education and open discourse are two potent antidotes to the ugliness of stigma. Following our pilot run, the results will be evaluated and the group will be recruiting UBC volunteers to expand the project to more classrooms and ensure its sustainability in future years.

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