MENTAL HEALTH & HIGH SCHOOL CURRICULUM GUIDE

> Understanding Mental Health and Mental Illness

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Understanding mental health and mental illness

Stigma

Seeking help and finding support

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About CMHA

The Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA), founded in 1918, is one of the oldest voluntary organizations in Canada. Each year, it provides direct service to more than 100,000 Canadians through the combined efforts of more than 10,000 volunteers and staff across Canada in over 135 communities.

As a nation-wide, voluntary organization, the Canadian Mental Health Association promotes the mental health of all and supports the resilience and recovery of people experiencing mental illness. The CMHA accomplishes this mission through advocacy, education, research and service.

"Our Vision Is Mentally Healthy People In A Healthy Society".

The Canadian Mental Health Association focuses on combating mental health problems and emotional disorders. Our tools include research and information services, sponsored research projects, workshops, seminars, pamphlets, newsletters and resource centres.

The CMHA’s programs assist with employment, housing, early intervention for youth, peer support, recreation services for people with mental illness, stress reduction workshops and public education campaigns for the community.

In addition, the CMHA acts as a social advocate to encourage public action and commitment to strengthening community mental health services and legislation and policies affecting services. All our mental health projects are based on principles of empowerment, peer and family support, participation in decision-making, citizenship, and inclusion in community life.

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Educating young people about mental health and mental illness

Having access to reliable information on positive mental health and mental illness is crucial for high school students for a number of reasons. Mental and emotional problems are common among high school students and need to be addressed, just like students’ physical health problems.

Even if students have not experienced mental illness, it is very likely that they know someone who has. Consider the following statistics to get an idea of just how widespread the effects of mental illness are in society, and among young people in particular:

1) Mental illness is second only to heart disease as the leading cause of disability in Canada and worldwide. (Global Burden of Disease – World Health Organization, World Bank, Harvard University, 1990)

2) Mental health problems affect one in every five young people at any given time.

3) The first symptoms of severe, chronic forms of mental illness (such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, depression and anxiety disorders) generally appear between the ages of 15 and 24. (CMHA, 2003)

4) An estimated two-thirds of all young people with mental health problems are not receiving the help they need.

5) Suicide is the third leading cause of death among young people aged 15-24. At least 90% of those who commit suicide have a diagnosable mental illness. Learning about mental illness and the importance of seeking treatment can save lives.

6) Fear of stigma and the resulting discrimination discourages individuals and their families from getting the help they need. (SAMHSA, 2004)

The modules in this guide present fundamental information about mental health and mental illness. Students can apply the knowledge they gain from this guide as they encounter new situations and make decisions about their lives.

The Role of Secondary Schools

Secondary schools provide an ideal environment and natural opportunities to address issues of mental health and illness. Educators can play an important role by delivering accurate, comprehensive information and by challenging the stereotypes about mental illness held by the general community.

The Mental Health and High School program encourages secondary schools to actively promote the message that seeking help is a sensible and supportive act rather than a sign of weakness or a breach of loyalty. Therefore, in addition to providing information and education about mental health and mental illness, this material actively promotes discussion about when, why, how and where to seek help.

Brief history of the Mental Health & Highschool Curriculum Project

The roots of this pilot and evaluation project go back a long way within the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA), National Office. For the past twenty-five years, in accordance with our Framework for Support model for mental health and recovery, CMHA has directed much of its energy into exploring the ways people with mental illness and mental health problems can live full and productive lives in community.

For youth specifically, some of our initiatives have engaged communities to take early action on first-episode psychosis, others support young people to find mainstream employment; and still others have helped universities and colleges understand how to accommodate students with psychiatric disabilities. In 2003-4, with funding from the Government of Canada's Social Development Partnerships Program, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, we developed tools for students, their teachers and parents to help them deal with mental health problems in high school.

The same funder subsequently supported the development of a Curriculum Guide for High Schools in 2006-7, under the leadership of Project Manager Catherine Willinsky, with indispensable contributions from Dr. Sonia Chehil, Dr. Stan Kutcher, and youth at Laing House in Halifax Nova Scotia. And the need to test that Guide in actual classrooms was the impetus for this latest phase of the project - a rigorous evaluation initiative involving CMHA branches in four sites across Canada: Barrie and Hawkesbury Ontario; Medicine Hat, Alberta; and Truro, Nova Scotia.

With continuing leadership support from Dr. Stan Kutcher, the evaluation team from University of Ottawa, and the youth at Laing House, and with strong guidance from Project Manager Heather Bruce, the project trained teachers to deliver the curriculum, tested the results in high schools in the pilot sites, and made the necessary adjustments. Teachers suggested changes that would help it meet their classroom realities and their students' needs; students told us how to make it more relevant to their interests and their lives. This revised Curriculum Guide is the result of all these efforts.

It has been a privilege for me, as the former CMHA National Director for Programs and Research, to see the evolution of this work from its seeds in the Framework for Support policy model to the new High School Curriculum Guide we have today. I hope it will make a difference for students, teachers and parents across the country as we all continue to learn how to nurture and protect our mental health.

Bonnie Pape
Project Advisor
A note from the Sun Life Financial Chair in Adolescent Mental Health

This version of the Mental Health Curriculum for High Schools is the result of an ongoing collaboration between the Canadian Mental Health Association and the Sun Life Financial Chair in Adolescent Mental Health at Dalhousie University and the IWK Health Centre (Halifax, NS). The revised curriculum incorporates suggestions and advice received from a pilot test at four different Canadian high schools and continues to be based on the best available scientific evidence and current understandings regarding mental health and mental disorders in young people.

This revised curriculum would not have been possible without the organizational leadership of Heather Bruce (CMHA), the pilot training participation of Melanie Kelly (IWK), the evaluation framework developed by Dr. Ron Melchers and Lindsey Pecaric of the University of Ottawa, and the curriculum revisions created by Shelley LeBlanc, Yefeng Wei and David Venn from the Sun Life Team, which I was pleased to provide with ongoing oversight and quality ascertainment.

Curriculum users are encouraged to access the website of the Canadian Mental Health Association (www.cmha.ca) and the Sun Life Chair (www.teenmentalhealth.org) for further information pertaining to youth mental health.

Dr. Stan Kutcher
The Pilot and Evaluation Project
(June 2008 - March 2009)

If you had asked me “Will you be Project Manager for a national high school pilot project in a few years?” while I was in the hospital being treated for mania, I would’ve said, “Er, now you’re the delusional one here...” And yet here I am! Mostly because Alex Keay at CMHA National Office thought of me when they were looking for someone to pilot their new high school curriculum. For a former high school teacher now working for CMHA Ottawa branch in public education, this was a wonderfully daunting opportunity. I’m eternally grateful to those that became my sherpas as I climbed that learning cliff, and to those that had faith that I could do it. I just might end up saving the world after all, one student at a time.

I’d like to dedicate this guide to my son Adrian and all the young people making their way through this tough thing we call life. May it offer them some compassion, some hope, and the inspiration to make their mental health a priority.

Heather Bruce, Project Manager
In memory of my father Lou Bruce, 1933 - 1985, who took his life, and gave me the passion to do this work.

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