

Mental health programs target stigma for men and boys



By Brock Weir

All too often men think that silence equates to strength ? keep quiet, toughen up, and you'll get through it. But that is a perception which came sharply into focus as local organizations launched Mental Health Week.

The mental health of men and boys is something that is often overlooked, but men are ?four times more likely to die by suicide? than women, according to Rebecca Shields, CEO of the Canadian Mental Health Association of York Region and South Simcoe.

Suicide, she says is the second leading cause of death for youth, regardless of gender, and something that is completely preventable.

?Most of that is around stigma and people who are ashamed to access the resources they need,? says Ms. Shields. ?We really wanted to open up the conversation around men and boys mental health in particular because often when we think of silence as strength, but the reality is nobody needs to feel bad. We all have the right to good mental health and to be able to feel good and it is not any kind of character weakness.?

Indeed, a key point the CMHA aims to drive home is that illness is not a weakness. Mental health affects us all, says Ms. Shield, and it is important to seek out these opportunities.

If, however, there is still reluctance or a degree of intimidation to seek out these resources, these resources might soon find you. On Wednesday, the CMHA of York Region and South Simcoe travelled to King Township in a particularly striking vehicle to launch MOBYSS ? Mobile York South Simcoe, the first mobile, fully comprehensive health clinic for youth between the ages of 12 and 25.

?Imagine for a moment a 39 foot RV wrapped in graffiti and instead of a bedroom at the back, imagine a doctor's office,? says Ms. Shields. ?Our RV is going to travel to where youth are at, such as skate parks and the mall, so our youth can then access full health resources, including mental health resources when they need it the most.?

The RV won't focus strictly on mental health, but will also be equipped to provide a number of health resources including checkups for an infection or cold.

?It is completely youth-friendly and this is going to make a substantial difference to youth, especially young boys as well as girls,? she adds. ?When they are ready to reach out, they will.?

MOBYSS is completely connected to the internet and social media. Through their website, www.mobyss.ca, people can access their

GPS to locate the bus, find out where their next stop is going to be, and book an appointment. From there, they will receive a text reminder when their spot on the bus is ready.

In addition to providing that all-important ?comprehensive health care?, it is also hoped this roving mental health provider will also go a long way in challenging and breaking down these stereotypes and stigma that impact so many young and not-so-young men.

?We know that one in four young people of both genders will experience psychological distress,? says Ms. Shields. ?We also know that lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender and questioning youth are substantially more at risk of anxiety, depression and suicide. Any time a youth is a little bit different or could potentially feel they are different can potentially cause great anxiety because it is such a time of development for the brain. I think for young boys it is so true because of the stereotypes around what it means to be a man and what that means in terms of not asking for help or not being able to be vulnerable.

?What we have to recognize is mental health is health. When we have a cold we don't think that we are weak just because we get a cold. Mental health is an illness, it is not a weakness in personality. It is not a deficiency. It is an illness and it is just like any other illness. If we understand that, then they can get the treatment just like they would any kind of treatment for any kind of health condition early on.?