

Wellness centre brings new support service to York Region



By Brock Weir

It takes a village to raise a child, but this village should be there to lend a hand from adulthood through all the twists and turns life provides.

This is the message of Aurora's Riverwalk Eating Disorders and Wellness Centres as they prepare to launch a new program to 'empower' the people around living with eating disorders and addictions to lend a therapeutic hand where it is most needed.

'I really believe that this is the breakthrough,' says Janice Morgante, Executive Director of Riverwalk. 'It will empower the individual so that people around that individual can support them to find their strength.'

Emotion-Focused Family Therapy is a new treatment model for York Region which focuses on the friends, family, and others 'who care about the wellness of individuals struggling with anxiety, depression and substance disorders,' says Ms. Morgante. It is a treatment program far outside the norm which is rooted in the belief in 'the healing power of families across the lifespan.'

'Emotion coaching is not the norm anywhere,' adds Ms. Morgante. 'Rather, individuals might go to a hospital or treatment programs and this approach is to say we know the individuals are part of families and communities; we also know there are long wait lists to go into treatment programs and many of those individuals are so unwell that a therapeutic approach isn't supportive until after they are medically stable.'

'What we're trying to say is let's support the individual and their families in the community at basically no cost, well in advance of someone being in such a deteriorated state. People do deteriorate while they are on lengthy wait lists. This is proactive, there are no costs once families are trained, and it is accessible.'

Lead by Dr. Joanne Dolhanty and Dr. Adele Lafrance Robinson, all day sessions will take place on February 6 and 7 in Maple. Through the intensive two day program, parents, friends, and caregivers will be given an arsenal of practical strategies to help support individuals, interrupt systems, and provide that all-important emotional support. Once equipped, these people will have the tools they need to respond when they need to, without having to contend with lengthy wait times and clinicians.

This will address a dearth in York Region of people who are able to respond, says Ms. Morgante.

'Many families are walking on egg shells,' she says. 'They don't know what to do and don't know how to empower the person they love. They might have their own block to prevent them from being as effective as they could, so [there is a need] to provide this in our community, with our loved ones.'

'You do not need to be a clinician. This is mom and pop, brothers and sisters, spouses and everybody.'

This program is just one of many things currently underway at Riverwalk, an organization which was at the receiving end of a significant grant from the Ontario Trillium Foundation last week. Awarded \$240,100 over the next four years, the grant will enable them to establish a collaborative arts therapy program to strengthen the emotional well being of individuals with addictions, eating disorders, and other challenges.

They are also creating a day program where someone can take advantage of more than one program currently offered by Riverwalk.

'Individuals really have no place to turn,' says Ms. Morgante. 'People walk in the door and they relax. That is already the beginning where they can become more in touch with their feelings and perhaps the traumas and stresses. To say we'll meet for half an hour is a good start, but if we add in relaxation like yoga and therapeutic art, someone can say, maybe twice a week, they can come in for a program for three or four hours 'that really allows me to address my emotional needs' and that could lead into addressing the physical needs that are part of a recovery from an eating disorder.'

For more information on Emotional Therapy, upcoming art programs or other support services offered by Riverwalk, visit www.edoyr.com.