

## More people seeking mental health supports during pandemic than ever before: CMHA



A five-week lockdown seemed manageable at the start of the global pandemic.

As these five weeks turned into months, and then a year, and even more, that manageability, for some, went out the window.

Now, as we approach the two-year anniversary of COVID-19's arrival in Ontario, with Omicron and continued uncertainty, more people are accessing mental health supports than at any other time in the pandemic, according to the Canadian Mental Health Association (Ontario).

A poll recently released by the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) shows that one in four people (24 per cent) of Ontarians have sought help for mental health challenges, up from 17 per cent last winter and nine per cent almost two years ago.

Data from the poll also indicates that while ?people have had their ups and downs,? their levels of ?mental health distress? are essentially on par to where they were at the start of the pandemic, particularly with stress, anxiety and depression.

?We've conducted four polls during the pandemic because we wanted to get a sense of how people are doing nearly two years in,? said Camille Quenneville, CEO, CMHA Ontario. ?Needless to say, we're very concerned that the numbers are going in the wrong direction and people are not improving.?

While the CMHA said it is a positive that one in four people are taking it upon themselves to seek support, 65 per cent of those polled said that existing mental health supports are helpful, a downturn from 77 per cent near the start of the pandemic.

?This is troubling as it may be an indicator that people's mental health challenges are more complex than they might've thought,? said Quenneville. ?Many people might be saying they're fine but that's not what we're seeing in the data.?

Locally, at the CMHA of York Region and South Simcoe (CMHA-YRSS), they are encouraged that people, in their view, are becoming more comfortable in identifying that they need support.

?I think with the pandemic it has helped to normalize it, that this is impacting everyone's mental health,? says Shauna Eisen, a manager at the CMHA-YRSS. ?We're not just seeing individuals who have a more severe mental illness, but individuals who may

not have experienced mental illness before or any challenges experienced for the first time because of the pandemic. Because of what it has done with our social connections and allowing us to do the things that give us routine, structure, and keep us mentally well. I think that is the shift we have seen: more people coming from different directions and hopefully feeling more comfortable connecting with our services.?

From the perspective of those working at the CMHA-YRSS, the pandemic has helped to find common ground between staff and clients because they're all going through the pandemic together.

?I think we can really appreciate the COVID fatigue and the hopes and disappointments of going through the different waves,? says Eisen. ?I think we're seeing that with our clients, too. There can be points as we continue on that are further discouraging; we get these waves of hope and encouragement that things are getting better and then we see the shift. Our staff and our programming really try to support through first acknowledgement ? it is okay to feel that way ? and always connecting people back to what has helped them in the past. What can be done?

?It is interesting because a lot of the individuals that we may have supported for years, we see them requiring more promoting and reminders to get back to what supported them in the past. It's the acknowledgement and recognizing that we're all going through that. It is nice working in mental health to find those threads of commonality. It is really important to be human and connect with people, that this is something everyone is going through and everyone is going to have challenges with it, too, so you're not alone in that. I think some individuals who have struggled with mental illness for years sometimes feel like they are in this separate group away and sometimes it is really nice to find that common thread.?

Throughout the pandemic, the CMHA has worked to expand its Bounce Back program on behalf of the Province. It offers over-the-phone coaching for anyone 15+ focusing particularly on anxiety and depression.

?When we see this increase in need, and sometimes we only have so much capacity, I think there is still a great need for there to be an increase in funding to be able to expand and meet the needs that are current for this pandemic and what we imagine we will see in the endemic stages as well,? says Eisen.

As we move close to that stage, Eisen says it is important for people to take notice when they see ?significant changes in their ability? where their capacity to do the things they need and what they want to do every day, even if they don't see it as a ?dire? situation, to reach out for help and support.

?You don't need to have a significant mental health diagnosis to want to receive help and support,? she says. ?That's the universality of it. Everyone has mental health, we like to say, just like everyone has physical health. We have all different levels of different support. If you're feeling challenges and struggling, reach out because there will always be something available and you don't have to wait.

?If you're not comfortable connecting with services, connect with people you do trust and are comfortable with. Even if you're connecting with a friend or a family member, just about how you're feeling. It is always up to you to share your story and what you're experiencing, but the most challenging piece is the loneliness and the social isolation. When you're connecting with other people, it doesn't feel so lonely. You can even just share that with them. People are always concerned about being a ?burden' or a ?bother' but the people who really care about you, it is not a burden and it is an honour for people when they feel that they can help the people they care about, even simply by listening. It really takes a lot of that challenge away and sometimes that is the step that takes someone to the next point: having someone to walk beside you or even to have someone to listen can make a big difference.?

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter