

York Region students join forces to battle stigmas surrounding mental health



By Brock Weir

Mental health has no face, nor does it have any limits, but it is not something that should be avoided or shied away from, according to York Region students.

Students from across the York Catholic District School Board are returning to their schools this week, equipped with tools to 'empower' their school communities following a symposium in Aurora last week.

150 teens from all area high schools descended on the Board's headquarters on Bloomington Road for the first annual student Mental Health Symposium 'Be Empowered', which sought to raise awareness about mental health, increase mental health literacy, promote healthy coping skills and decrease the stigma associated with mental health.

'I find a lot of students don't know the difference between mental health and mental illness, so I really want to be a part of removing that stigma,' says Angelica Galluzzo from St. Maximilian Kolbe Catholic High School, who also serves as Junior Student Trustee for the Board. 'I don't want students to be afraid of the term 'mental health,' I want them to embrace it and realise it for what it really is.'

This is a view shared by Austin Cordova, a student at St. Jean de Brebeuf Catholic High School in Vaughan. Austin's interest in mental health started with his cousin who was diagnosed with autism at the age of six. While his cousin has a very supportive group of family and friends, Austin realised that many are not so lucky when he began volunteering with special needs children in Toronto before reaching out for opportunities closer to home, including participating in his school's TAMI (Talking About Mental Illness) program.

'I believe there is a stigma that these people are simply demanding attention, or they are just spoiled in a sense,' says Austin of depression and self-harm. 'I don't think that is true. I believe an individual suffering from mental illness means they have certain underlying issues that cause them to think that way and I think those issues need to be dealt with as well.'

Tyler Yap Young, a student at Newmarket's Sacred Heart Catholic High School, was in Grade 9 when he found out his friend was living with an eating disorder.

'I never would have guessed it unless she told me,' he says. 'From there, I just helped her and I wanted to learn more about mental health and how I could help other people. Stereotypes are a big issue when facing mental illness and if I can help diminish those stereotypes in my school community and have people understand what they are really going through, I think that will be very good.'

That is certainly what Dr. Giuliana Malvestuto-Filice, psychologist for the YCDSB, had in mind when putting together this symposium. With directives from the Ministry of Education to roll out mental health programs to schools, they were given the leeway to roll this out in the manner they saw fit, given the needs of the students.

?We decided that in order to be able to empower the students, build their resiliency skills and reduce stigma in terms of mental health, we need to empower them: make them aware of mental health, make them aware of coping skills, and equip them with the coping skills for difficult situations,? she says.

?In terms of how we can measure success of this, we can look at the number of students who are going to be coming forward and disclosing because once you raise the level of awareness then those who are, in fact, at risk, are probably going to start coming forward. Peers are really important. For example, if my friend, Mary, is having these types of difficulties, attending these workshops and talking about it in school is going to raise my level of awareness about the different signs and symptoms I have to look out for, and I am going to see that in my peers. This will allow me to come forward and share this important information with a trusted adult who will be able to help.?