

Students set to start the school year with challenges, but mental health supports are ready

As many Ontario students gear up for the start of the school year on Tuesday, they might be doing so while experiencing some invisible challenges.

Last week, the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) released findings from their Ontario Student Drug Use and Health Survey, which was conducted last year.

The findings paint a grim picture of how Ontario students are faring when it comes to mental health and addictions.

Key findings show that 38 per cent of students rate their mental health as fair or poor, while a similar number (37 per cent) reported experiencing elevated stress levels, said CAMH in their report. In addition, more than half of students indicate a moderate to serious level of psychological distress, a figure that has doubled over the past decade.

The study also found that one in five students report they have engaged in self-harm in the past year, while one-in-six had serious thoughts about suicide in the past year.

These results paint a concerning picture of youth mental health in Ontario, said survey lead Dr. Hayley Hamilton. Currently, more than half of Ontario students report symptoms of depression and anxiety and a third of students rate their ability to cope as fair to poor. This trend points to a generation under increasing stress and the need for continued and increased investments in youth mental health.

While schools are in the final crunch to make everything ready for the return to the books, mental health resources are mobilizing to make sure they're there for when students need them.

Kylee Goldman, Director of Services Youth, Innovation, and Interprofessional Practice for the Canadian Mental Health Association of York Region and South Simcoe (CMHA-YRSS) says this is a time of year where they are hearing a lot from youth and their families as oftentimes there's a feeling of stress and overwhelm as Back-to-School season dawns.

Oftentimes it is the youth who are in transition to a new environmental setting those who are going from public school into secondary school, transitioning from Grade 9 into High School, says Goldman. We get individuals reaching out who are nervous, they're not sure what they're going to experience in high school, they may be separated from a lot of the peer groups they once were connected to in their primary school, so they are just feeling really anxious.

They also hear from families, particularly parents, whose youth or teens are struggling and they don't know how to support them.

CMHA-YRSS offers many services for youth and their families.

One such initiative is their mobile mental health bus, dubbed MOBYSS, where community outreach workers are out in public, going to places where youth tend to gather, such as schools and parks, really getting on the ground to interact with youth and hear what their needs are.

More young people are starting to get more comfortable talking about mental health, not keeping it bottled up, not keeping it hidden, not thinking about it as a secret or something to be ashamed of; they're starting to share with each other, sharing with their peers, with their family, and with professionals asking for support, says Goldman. One of the really great things we're seeing in the community is more youth are coming forward looking for supports, and we continue to encourage youth to involve their support systems: getting families involved so they can walk this journey together and get the supports they need as a family.

MOBYSS, Goldman notes, is not for mental health alone. Youth can also access free and confidential medical support.

?If they have questions about their physical health and they're not really sure where to go, maybe they don't have a good relationship with their family doctor or maybe they don't have one, they can come hop on the bus and they can get some really great, accurate information from our nurse practitioner which is also free of charge.?

While the stats from CAMH's study might be disheartening, the CMHA-YRSS say a silver lining is that comfortability factor in talking about what might be wrong.

?We have youth and families who are starting to share their experience of maybe using substances or alcohol to cope with their mental health, and there are also more youth coming forward sharing about their mental health journey and experiences and asking questions about things like using substances to cope,? says Goldman. ?They are looking for information and we're able to provide them with accurate, up to date information that can help them in making healthier choices for themselves. In many cases we are seeing youth who maybe were either using things like alcohol or substances to cope or were just thinking about using those mechanisms to cope. They were able collect the information they really needed to make an informed decision, and many of those youth have shared with us that they have chosen to go in another direction. They have chosen not to use alcohol as a coping mechanism; they decided to join a group, or talk to their parents or talk to their school's social worker to get them some help. I think the really great thing we're seeing is the more people are talking about and it is giving people more accurate information then to be able to make those informed choices.

?Going through transitions and going through stress, anxiety, and maybe symptoms of depression, it's normal, it's okay, it can feel very overwhelming and there are so many supports and resources available. Always remember you are not alone out there. This is a really tough time of year with return to school, but we are all in this community together and we will all navigate whatever comes to us in this community.?

For more information about the CMHA, visit cmha-yr.ca. For services provided my CAMH, visit camh.ca.

By Brock Weir