

What's the mental health solution? The youth might be

Written By ROBERT BELARDI

It's important to look at the facts before anything else.

Before the pandemic began, even well before, you wouldn't be at fault to surmise that mental health, particularly in youth, had been at risk. Even adults, who continue to face challenges as well into their lives.

Mental health is one of the most prevalent discussions today. It's truly staggering to look at it.

And it might be because of the infectious globe we live in. Competition. Money. Success, are all compounds to distress. I can tell you first hand, as a 26-year-old man, it's taken a toll on me at times. It's taken a toll on my family members. Going to school. Earning an education. Paying off debt and somehow affording a decent home in this real estate market. These are some areas that grind my gears.

No wonder pre-pandemic youth minds were practically at civil wars with themselves and we've never known it. The Centre of Addiction and Mental Health knew it.

When we broaden it to moderate and serious psychological distress, we see really high numbers as well. For example, over half of girls report moderate to serious psychological distress. That's 56 per cent, said Tara Elton-Marshall, an Independent Scientist for the Institute for Mental Health Policy Research at Centre For Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH).

What is also concerning that maybe isn't there in the total figure is the fact that we're seeing boys; who tend to indicate less psychological distress, but we're seeing a significant increase among boys. We've seen a doubling of moderate and serious psychological distress since 2013. It went from 15 per cent to 31 per cent.

Every two years since 1977, CAMH has conducted a survey for students in Ontario, monitoring their stress levels.

The numbers from the 2018/2019 year, before COVID-19, displayed gut-wrenching figures such as these and more.

The latest report for Ontario saw 15 per cent of students have purposely harmed themselves, 20 per cent of students report the use of prescription opioid use and 16 per cent have thought about suicide.

Not to mention one-quarter of students have visited a health care professional (260,900) and 35 per cent didn't know where to turn.

The causes of these issues can be speculated on everything mentioned before, along with social media use, time in front of screens, sleep and exercise. Although it isn't confirmed these are all of the triggers, these most certainly are some.

You can also imagine the impediments of the pandemic and what the numbers might look like due to COVID-19. For youth, it hasn't been confirmed, but for adults, on CAMH's COVID-19 survey, it has.

Between the ages of 18-39, 31.2 per cent of Canadians have been experiencing severe levels of anxiety while 27.1 per cent of Canadians aged 40-59 reported moderate to severe anxiety.

In the binge drinking category, 29.8 per cent of Canadians between the ages of 18-39 have indulged in binge drinking and 26.8 per cent have done it between the ages of 40-59.

More statistics can be found directly on the CAMH website.

But the light at the end of the tunnel isn't simply to have the youth shut out and the adults left to ponder upon numerous hypotheses to fix these issues.

Senior Scientist in the Child, Youth and Emerging Adult Program at CAMH and Associate Professor in the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Toronto, Joanna Henderson says the resilience from the youth has been remarkable.

?When we look around the world and we look at who is driving change, we see youth leaders. We look at some of the things happening around Indigenous rights, rights for Black and other racialized people. We see youth leading,? Henderson said.

She is studying how the youth can co-create an existential solution that would show how services are being delivered and if there are more prominent solutions to deliver positive messages of change.

How do we increase awareness? How do we indicate to someone to recognize when their mood swings shift because of the content that they are sub-consciously processing? When do we simply take a break?

For some that live in the web of media, there's no way to work around it. Elton-Marshall says youth who are exposed to high levels of social media suffer from psychological distress.

Most of the services even used for school revolve around social media. But, limiting some of the content may work without falling back into withdrawal.

But reducing it would be an option. Tune out some of the noise. Be aware when platforms study your algorithms. When a website that you would normally never visit before shows up on your feed, be aware of that promotion and how it affects you.

For as long as the pandemic looms, for adults the numbers say it all. For youth, pre-pandemic numbers might influence your opinion to be around the same neighbourhood of what has been seen before; maybe worse.

But to create a bona fide society, one that may have despondent thoughts, it's time to research how we all can benefit from the education on mental health and preach its findings and concerns to others.

That first starts with a conversation. Then it turns to action. It's much easier said than done but when you study and craft a method for improvement much like CAMH has, it can become an open conversation.

And when we as a society are unafraid to speak about these issues, that's how it gets better. To know it's okay. Because it is okay to feel what you feel and it is possible to improve it. To some degree, we've all been there.