



Personal Reflections on Mental Health as we Continue to Navigate Through the Pandemic

It seems as though it was so long ago that the clock hit midnight on New Year's Eve and we collectively looked forward to the year ahead. The promise of new hope, good health, and prosperity is what we hoped would magically appear during the months ahead of us. Of course, the reality – which in the backs of our minds we knew was the case – is that that evening is really no different than any other during our calendar year. We as individuals and communities collectively shape what lies ahead.

The great reality in 2021 is the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Showing few signs of letting up, this virus has forced us all to rethink almost everything we do. From travelling to an exotic destination for a long-anticipated vacation, to simply deciding how to shop for our food, the pandemic has caused an enormous shift in how we think, act, and especially interact with each other. The pandemic has also put a lens on an issue which has long-affected Canadians and that we have only just recently started to pay serious attention to – those of us affected by mental health concerns.

The subject of mental health challenges is starting to be increasingly documented and reported through research papers and the media. Community Development Halton just focussed on the issue and how it affects our older adult population in Halton in its most recent Community Lens (*Senior Wellbeing During COVID-19*) – with additional reports to follow soon.

Of course, these issues apply to the wide spectrum of our population and increasingly we are learning of how young people are being affected – perhaps disproportionately higher than one would

think. And with this significant number of our population about to enter the workforce and start families, this is a serious cause for concern.

Statistics Canada just released a report (based on 2017 data) which suggested that over 2.0 million Canadians 15 years of age and older have a mental health-related disability. Within the report it was reported that 42% are renters. It went on to suggest that among the approximate 430,000 Canadians with mental health related disabilities who considered themselves housebound, 45% said that their social connections outside the home are limited and 35% said that they did not feel safe leaving home. Unfortunately, these numbers released recently were pre-COVID-19 and we know that the situation has only become worse during the past year.

In a report released by the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) in December 2020, it was stated that, “most people in Canada (71%) indicate they are worried about the second wave of the virus, with 58% worried about a loved one or family member dying, and only 21% feeling hopeful. As winter approaches, 40% of Canadians say their mental health has deteriorated since March, with the decline more pronounced in those who are unemployed (61%), those with a pre-existing mental health issue (61%), **younger people aged 18-24 (60%)**, Indigenous peoples (54%), those who identify as LGBTQ2+ (54%) and those with a disability (50%). Almost half of women (45%) and a third of men (34%) say their mental health has declined”.

Pre-COVID-19, the CMHA cited that 10-20% of youth are affected by a mental illness or disorder, and that this is the single most disabling group of disorders worldwide. The total number of 12 to 19-year-old’s in Canada at risk of developing depression is a staggering 3.2 million. Suicide is second only to accidents for the death of 15 to 24-year-old’s (24% of 15 to 24-year-old’s and 16% of 25 to 44-year-old’s). And once identified, only 1 in 5 youth requiring services actually receive it! Once again, one can only imagine that these numbers have increased during the pandemic, but to date we are too early to have a firm set of data points.

Lots of statistical information showing that anxiety and depression is definitely growing – and very likely even more so during the pandemic. But how do we personally see this and as a result become affected ourselves, either directly or indirectly? Well, these days you probably don’t have to go any further than your own family or friends to see how tragic these disorders have become.

My daughter has lived with the realities of anxiety, which likely started during her high school years. She shared with me the following:

“As someone who has lived my entire life with health anxiety - the irrational fear that a sudden health crisis is always around the corner - this pandemic has been a mental health nightmare. The decade I’ve spent in various therapies learning to convince my overactive brain that the world is generally safe, and the bottom is not about to drop out beneath me shattered with the realization that suddenly, as of mid-March 2020, the whole world is living in my anxiety, except this time it’s real.

As months passed and I eventually learned to manage my fear of the virus, that gave way to an

unrelenting depression. I'm out of work. I can't see my loved ones. I couldn't even see my grandparents who live 10 minutes away on Christmas, knowing they're 90 and I already don't know how many Christmases they have left. The simple things that give life meaning - live music, going to the movies, the first birth of a close friend's child, board games with friends, festivals, even just going to the park or a favourite store - are out of reach for who knows how long. And perhaps worst of all, the realization that after that first month or two of clapping for healthcare workers and painting rocks passed, people seem crueler now than ever before. Those who don't care about anyone but themselves and their own indulgences, the vulnerable be damned! Those who deny (in their own fear, I know) that there is even a problem. Those who have channeled their boredom into harassing others online, free from the niceties of having to interact face to face. Some days it feels like it will never end. I know the pandemic will, eventually. But I think about everyone else who has been profoundly affected by this period in history and will never be the same because of the trauma we have all faced. I hope that one of the lessons we take away from COVID-19 is that we need better, more accessible supports for mental health treatment - and not just talk, but action and genuine empathy for each other".

It's heartbreaking to see your own child express these words. And I know that I am not alone!

So, what do we do? I have gone on much longer than necessary here, so I will conclude with the words expressed by a past Prime Minister of ours. And with the words he shared, I share with you that I firmly believe that this can be a much better New Year ... if only we heed these words....

"A society which emphasizes uniformity is one which creates intolerance and hate. A society which eulogizes the average citizen is one which breeds mediocrity. What the world should be seeking, and what in Canada we must continue to cherish, are not concepts of uniformity but human values: compassion, love, and understanding." (P.M. Pierre Elliot Trudeau, October 9, 1971)

Warmest Regards,

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