TAKE CONTROL OF YOUR MENTAL HEALTH

IN MANY WAYS, PRESERVING MENTAL HEALTH IS MUCH LIKE MAINTAINING A HEALTHY BODY

Strategies like going to the gym and eating properly help keep you mentally as well as physically fit.

And just like it’s up to you to keep your heart and bones healthy, you also have to take control of your own mental health. “You own it; it’s your mind, and you need to give it as much attention as you give to your physical body,” says Connie Krahenbil, Executive Director, Canadian Mental Health Association Manitoba, Winnipeg.

Managing stress is a big part of maintaining mental health, says Krahenbil, who takes steps to avoid sleep “getting behind me” because she knows what that can do to her overall health. Just as with physical health, it’s important to be committed to mental fitness and to incorporate these steps into your everyday life.

Recognizing when you need to “reach out” and talk to someone you trust is also important. Everyone has felt sad or blue at one time or another, but too often, you don’t want to bother anyone so you withdraw, maybe cry alone in your room. But when you do talk to a friend, “you always feel 100 times better,” says Krahenbil.

Sometimes these strategies aren’t enough and you may need to seek out an expert. But this should be no different than someone who has diabetes, who has to see his doctor regularly and take insulin or other medications to treat the disease.

It’s important to acknowledge that you have an illness and to accept it. “We all have our crosses to bear,” says Krahenbil.

And it’s important not to rely solely on medication such as antidepressants to make you well. “The work is up to you,” says Krahenbil. “Taking those pills is just half of it, just like insulin is just half of it for a person with diabetes.”

– Pauline Anderson

MENTAL HEALTH A BASIC HUMAN RIGHT

In the future, mental health will be viewed as a basic human right across Canada.

“Just as with physical disabilities and HIV/AIDS, mental health will be linked to human rights, empowerment, dignity and respect,” says Peter Coleridge, National Chief Executive Officer, Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) Toronto.

Making this happen will need more than merely messages and campaigns “that in isolation, don’t have a sustained impact,” says Coleridge. It will also require changes in public policies, behaviours and attitudes to mental health in the workplace, in schools, and elsewhere.

The CMHA vision for the future also includes the 120-plus CMHA regional offices not only continuing to respond to local mental health needs, but also working together in a synergistic way to improve understanding surrounding mental health issues.

Canada will soon have its own national mental health strategy, says Coleridge.
WORLDPACE MENTAL HEALTH AFFECTS BOTTOM LINE

Canadian companies are beginning to realize that workplace mental health is important to their bottom line, that lost productivity and absenteeism can cost them dearly.

“Organizations should make it part of their strategic plan to address the issue of workplace mental health directly,” says Donna Hardaker, workplace mental health specialist, Canadian Mental Health Association, York Region.

Across corporate Canada, there still exists a kind of “don’t ask; don’t tell” attitude when it comes to mental illness. “People have to hide it if they have a mental illness because discrimination is alive and well,” says Hardaker.

Companies should increase workplace mental health “literacy,” she says. Suggested strategies include:

- Caseworkers encourage these youngsters to work or go to school, and to socialize. “Nobody has been known to get well from a mental illness sitting in their room by themselves,” says Hardaker. “We encourage them to pursue their goals — realistic, achievable and beneficial goals.”
- Many of these young people have been homeless and been tempted to take drugs just to feel happy. “If you do crystal meth, you don’t sleep for three or four days, so no one steals your stuff, and you don’t eat so you don’t have to worry about coming up with money to buy food,” says Baker.

BY THE NUMBERS

- Every day, 500,000 Canadians are absent from work due to psychiatric problems.
- Mental Health is the number one cause of disability in Canada, accounting for nearly 30 per cent of disability claims and 70 per cent of the total costs.


BY THE NUMBERS

- 70 per cent of mental health problems and illnesses have their onset during childhood or adolescence.
- Young people age 15-24 are more likely to report mental illness and/or substance use disorders than other age groups.


HELPING TEENS EARLY KEY TO SUCCESS

Identifying and treating mental illness early on can save a teenager from worsening symptoms, self-blame and a lifetime of addictions, panhandling and prostitution.

Research shows that mental illness in people up to the age of 25 is the biggest single burden of any disease in this age group. For some experts, reducing this burden involves investing more resources in early identification of mental disorders, in easier access to proven and cost-effective therapies, and in creating a “one-stop” system of health care that addresses mental as well as physical health under one roof.

As it stands, 70 per cent of mental disorders can be diagnosed in young people, but they often get overlooked. Rodney Baker, Executive Director, Canadian Mental Health Association, Simon Fraser Branch, talks about a woman in her 30s only recently diagnosed with bipolar disorder (formerly called manic depression). Her life took a downward spiral as a teen, followed by marriage to a biker and alcoholism, and generally a “wrecked” life.

A program in the area called Youth Supportive Independent Living (YSIL) tries to prevent such scenarios. It helps young people aged 16 to 21 years who suffer a mental illness find housing and develop skills for independent living.

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Some of the young clients have been turned out of the family home for a multitude of reasons. Their parents may not be able to accept their child’s mental illness, may not have the resources to properly care for their child, are addicted themselves, or may even have died.

The program boasts some success stories. “We have had people from our program who have gotten well, finished school, gotten married, and had kids,” says Baker.

Acceptance of the mental illness is an important ingredient of such successes. But it’s something that is especially difficult for young, impressionable kids who just wants to fit in with their peers.

— Pauline Anderson

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CANADA’S DOCTORS ARE LISTENING.
Canada Post recently unveiled a stamp that has a unique claim to fame. The company issues an annual fundraising stamp supporting mental health, its cause of choice. This year’s stamp design was the first in the company’s 160-year history to be chosen by public vote.

Last November, a competition was held to find a design for this year’s stamp, which raises funds for the Canada Post Foundation for Mental Health. THE PUZZLE — designed by Terrebonne, Que., resident Miriane Majeau — received the most points and now adorns more than 3.5 million stamps available at post offices across Canada. A dollar from the sale of every booklet of 10 stamps is donated to the Canada Post Foundation for Mental Health.

“Dealing with mental health issues is like putting a puzzle together,” says Majeau. “As you connect the pieces, something beautiful and whole is revealed.”

Since 2008, Canada Post employees have helped raise nearly $5 million for the Foundation, and $4.6 million in grants has been disbursed to nearly 100 non-profit organizations across Canada.

STAY WITHIN YOUR BUDGET
Finances are a huge stressor. Consider celebrating the holiday with something other than a sit-down dinner. Spending time with your family could mean going on a hike together.

HELP OTHERS
Volunteering at a food bank or donating clothing to families in need are guaranteed to boost your spirits and help you cope with any stressor that comes your way.

THINK OF THOSE WHO ARE ALONE
Visit them or invite them over for something like a potluck dinner.

CALL FOR HELP IF YOU NEED IT
If the holiday is making you feel depressed or down, call the crisis number in your community. Remember that feeling depressed is normal.

— Pauline Anderson

Support mental health
Please buy a booklet of Mental Health stamps or make a donation to the Canada Post Foundation for Mental Health.

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