



MENTAL HEALTH SOLUTIONS THAT WORK

By Catherine Nolan
and Mark Cole

Across our country mental health problems continue to increase among our youth, resulting in a need for those working in education to be equipped with the skills to help support our students. Educators are front-line workers who are in a position to be able to identify and support our students in many ways. In the fall of 2015, the Newfoundland and Labrador English School District (NLESD) utilized funding from the Bell Let's Talk Community Fund to train two Behavioral Support Itinerant teachers as instructors in Mental Health First Aid (MHFA). During the first phase of this multi-year initiative, the instructors will focus on training a group of administrators

in schools with grades 7-12 students in the Eastern region where the student population is the highest. The training will continue on to other regions in Newfoundland and Labrador and over the longer term, it is intended that Mental Health First Aid training will be made available to all school administrators.

So why is it that the administrators are being trained? There is an increased demand on guidance counsellors who alone cannot address the many needs that come with our students on a daily basis. Mental Health First Aid provides administrators with the skills needed in supporting students experiencing mental health problems.

The program does not teach people how to be therapists, but rather teaches people how to recognize the signs and symptoms of mental health problems, provide initial help, and guide a person towards appropriate professional help. Having a staff member trained with these skills also means that students will have another “go-to” person in their school who has the ability to help them as needed. With this training, school administrators will also be better able to act as “mental health leaders” to both staff and students.

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NLESD is working to improve awareness of mental health problems. Prior to the fall of 2015, administrators in the Labrador region had received MHFA training and further training or updating is ongoing as necessary. As efforts continue, to date, three groups of administrators in the Eastern region have taken part in the two-day Mental Health First Aid training, and the feedback so far has been extremely positive. Participants consistently report an increase in knowledge and understanding of the signs of mental health problems, and how to appropriately respond when students present with these problems. As a result of this training, participants also identified an increased awareness of local resources and where to avail of help outside the school setting.

We’ve heard from experienced administrators, as well as other school district personnel, that this has been among the most relevant professional learning opportunity they have ever had. Some of their comments include:

“An excellent course - information to add to my toolbox.”

“Manual is a great resource/tool.”

“Great 2 days. Pertinent, useful, insightful, and supportive for my role as an administrator.”

“A great course to help with my professional as well as everyday encounters.”

“Extremely important training, particularly for those working with high risk individuals.”

“I feel much more confident in dealing with potential students or friends who may be at risk.”

“A must for daily work!”

Mental Health First Aid for Adults who Interact with Youth aged 12-24 is an evidence-based, international course administered through the Mental Health Commission of Canada. The goals of MHFA training are to increase mental health literacy and early

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Mental Health Solutions that Work

recognition of a developing mental health problem in an effort to prevent a future crisis. Some young people may feel too ashamed to share their problem or to seek help and others may not know what help is available to them. Mental Health First Aiders can play an important role in encouraging a young person to get professional help.

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Mental health problems are the chronic illnesses of our youth. Feelings of rejection are often experienced due to the stigma associated with mental illness. Although attitudes are improving, many young people still do not seek help for their mental health problems because of the persistent stigma. In their leadership role, school administrators can play an important part in addressing stigma and increasing empathy and understanding in their schools.

Mental health problems can be as disabling, if not more so, than many chronic physical illnesses, in that they can have a serious impact on physical health, work and relationships. MHFA addresses several specific areas of mental health affecting youth, including substance related disorders, mood disorders, deliberate self-injury, anxiety disorders, eating disorders and psychotic disorders. Over the 14-hour training session, participants learn the signs and symptoms of these problems, and the importance of early intervention. Through role plays and discussion, MHFA participants practice how they would respond to a mental health

problem. The Mental Health First Aid ‘action plan’ outlines specific steps to take in different situations, including what to do during a mental health crisis.

The positive participant feedback within our district indicates that Mental Health First Aid training provides a combination of valuable information and an effective skill set that can be used, not only in the school setting, but in our everyday lives as well. NLESD’s efforts to equip administrators with these important tools continue to move forward with the support of good community partners, like Bell Canada and the Mental Health Commission of Canada, and our amazingly professional educators throughout the province. Through district-wide initiatives such as the Mental Health First Aid Training effort, we are aiming to ensure our school communities have the skills, knowledge, and training needed to assist our students. As we know, the school-age years can be some of the most challenging in the lives of our young students and any assistance we can provide to ensure they come out the other side better, stronger, happier members of our community will benefit our greater society in the long run. ■

AUTHOR BIO

Catherine Nolan (B.Ed., B.Sp.Ed., M.Ed.) has taught at the elementary, secondary and post-secondary levels in St. John’s, NL. She has also served on the National Council of Welfare, addressing issues of poverty. Currently, Cathy works as a Behaviour Support Itinerant Teacher and teaches MHFA.

Mark Cole, B.Ed., M.Ed. (Counselling Psych.), has worked in education for the past 16 years as a classroom teacher, instructional resource teacher, guidance counsellor, and currently as a Behavior Support Itinerant Teacher. Mark is also a certified Mental Health First Aid Trainer.



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