THE CATALYST

Speaking up about student mental health

I finished university on grit, not support. Stigma, poverty, work hours, and relentless pressure made help hard to access—especially as pandemic stress spiked.

By: Nicole Chevrier | Posted: May 5, 2022

To say I was not fully prepared for post-secondary studies is an understatement. It was not a question of intelligence or academic ability. It had more to do with my mental health and lack of support. Yet against all odds, I was successful and graduated from university. How did I manage to complete my degree? Sheer grit and determination.

I was not alone in the struggle. Amongst my circle, almost everyone had either experienced or knew of someone living with anxiety, depression, substance use, or eating disorders. It was so common that it almost went without saying. Almost. For myself, I felt the power and the pain of stigma without ever having heard that word.

Besides, it can be difficult to recognize when you need help. People need to get help on their own terms when they are ready. For me, finding safe, inclusive, and non-judgmental help for mental health on campus seemed almost impossible. So, while I made it through and completed my degree, I recognize that not everyone is so lucky.

The fact is that not all students come to the post-secondary journey on equal footing. I knew plenty of students living in grinding poverty. I was among the many I knew whose grades suffered as a result of working just to survive.

The stakes are high. Who can afford to flunk out or struggle to find the cash to repeat a year? Students feel tremendous pressure to perform in a system that is highly competitive. What makes it even more difficult is the heavy focus on academic success which can discourage students from seeking help.

For too long the only choices appeared to be either fitting in to the range of normal academic performance, failing entirely, or asking for some type of accommodation, which puts someone in a position where they can feel like they are less worthy or capable than others.

In some ways, things are changing. We have been witnessing a shift in societal attitudes toward mental health, and growing understanding of how many people are impacted. We often hear statistics such as one in five people in Canada will experience a mental health problem or illness in any given year, accompanied by the message that it’s okay to not be okay.

Despite some important progress, post-secondary students continue to struggle with their mental health. Research shows that three out of four mental health problems start by age 24, when many young people are either in or just out of post-secondary studies. In a Canadian Alliance of Student Associations survey conducted in May 2020, more than 70 per cent of students said they had felt stressed, anxious, or isolated due to the pandemic, and more than 80 per cent were

worried about their futures beyond the pandemic.

What is encouraging is that despite the pandemic or perhaps because of it, many students are speaking up, driving solutions for themselves and their peers, and supporting each other.

Students are not the only ones taking action on mental health. Post-secondary institutions across Canada have started taking more steps to better support the mental health of their students. The National Standard of Canada for Mental Health and Well-Being for Post-Secondary Students, created by the Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC), is helping academic institutions better support students and integrate student mental health into their services, supports and systems. A starter kit is available to help people learn more and get started.

If you are interested in learning how to support the mental health of students, you may wish to look at the Inquiring Mind (TIM), the MHCC's evidence-based training program developed to promote mental health and reduce the stigma of mental illness in a student setting.

There is more that needs to be done, but when I reflect on how far we have come, it gives me hope for future generations of students.

Author: Nicole Chevrier

An avid writer and photographer. A first-time author, she recently published her first children's book to help children who are experiencing bullying. When she isn't at her desk, Nicole loves to spend her time doing yoga and meditation, ballroom dancing, hiking, and celebrating nature with photography. She is a collector of sunset moments.

Mental Health Commission of Canada
https://mentalhealthcommission.ca/
350 Albert Street, Suite 1210 Ottawa ON K1R 1A4
Tel: 613.683.3755 | Fax: 613.798.2989
mhccinfo@mentalhealthcommission.ca