

State of Mind—Let’s Talk About It

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Mental health is integral to an individual’s well-being and overall health. The World Health Organization conceptualizes mental health as a “state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community”.¹ Thus, mental illnesses are deviations from these normal functions. Mental illnesses are extremely diverse, ranging from depression and anxiety disorders to schizophrenia and bipolar affective disorders. They impact the lives of 1 in 5 Canadians, contribute to one-third of hospital stays and are a significant economic burden, costing close to 51 billion dollars per year.^{2,3} In Canada, there are approximately 4,000 suicides each year and 90% are estimated to be linked with mental health issues.⁴ Each category of mental illness is unique, as are the individuals affected by these illnesses. Because of this complexity, an entire specialty of medicine is dedicated towards the individualized treatment of patients with mental illness.

In 1808, the German physician Johann Christian Reil coined the term “psychiatry” and stressed the importance of studying mental health, as he believed mental illness had the potential to cause “somatic disorders”. He postulated that physicians, and not experts from other disciplines, should treat those living with mental illness. He was also a strong advocate for reducing stigma and believed that government and society had a responsibility to people living with mental illness.⁵ These concepts are still relevant today, over 205 years later.

Stigma surrounding mental illness is a difficult problem to approach. Like many issues, it can arise from misunderstanding, lack of knowledge and fear. Stigma can be a very powerful deterrent for individuals who wish to seek medical advice or talk with someone about their issues. In fact, the Mental Health Commission of Canada estimates that up to 60% of people are prevented from seeking help due to fear of stigmatization.⁶ Fortunately, mental health is starting to become a bigger priority. Major companies and foundations are stepping up to increase awareness and provide education with the hopes of reducing stigma and providing better support for the millions of Canadians living with mental illness. For example, Bell’s “Let’s Talk” Campaign, announced in 2010, encourages Canadians to engage in dialogue around mental health and all funds raised on “Let’s Talk Day” support mental health related initiatives.⁷ The Vancouver Canucks organization has also been involved in “Mindcheck” and “Hockey Talks”, initiatives

that aim to increase awareness and education about mental health and effective treatments, especially to younger adults.⁸

This issue of the UBC Medical Journal (UBCMJ) explores diverse issues relating to mental health and addiction. These are topics of growing importance and concern for the Canadian health care system. By contributing to dialogue in this area, the UBCMJ hopes to increase awareness of these issues and facilitate further discussion on such topics so that more positive changes can be made moving forward. Our feature articles examine strategies to improve education in addiction medicine (Wood) and tell a personal story of addiction and recovery (Strang). Other articles include an overview of The Kelty Patrick Dennehy Foundation (Dhillon) and an interview with Dr. Gabor Maté on the benefits and struggles of a career in addiction medicine (Agha).

Mental health is becoming an increasingly important issue in health care. Graduates from health care disciplines entering into practice will deal with mental illness regardless of their chosen specialty. As future health care professionals, how can we best support our patients living with mental health issues? How can we reduce stigmatization? What changes can we advocate for? How can we maintain our own mental health and well-being? We hope that this issue of the UBCMJ fuels discussion around these topics. 

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