



# Teens helping teens

Unique RNAO-led program arms students with tools to use as they help other youth better understand the importance of good mental health.

BY MELISSA DI COSTANZO

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sk a roomful of 60 teenagers to list the things that affect their mental health and the responses are poignant and more or less what you'd expect. A lack of confidence. Stress. Peer pressure. Being judged. Feeling unattractive.

Helping teens to address these issues, and building resilience, is at the heart of a new partnership between RNAO and six public-health units across Ontario.

Representatives from these organizations want youth to feel empowered to help their peers through mental-health promotion, stigma reduction and substance-misuse prevention, which is why, a year ago, they formed the *Youth Mental Health and Addictions Champions* (YMHAC) project.

The barely 12-month-old initiative is funded through the Ontario Ministry of Health's *Healthy Communities Fund*, and includes other stakeholders such as mindyourmind, a youth mental-health program based in London, the Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health, and School Mental Health-ASSIST.

More than 60 teens from Grey-Bruce, Niagara, Porcupine, Toronto, Thunder Bay and Timiskaming – handpicked by teachers, public health nurses, and others working in mental health – converged on a sprawling retreat property in Caledon for two days in early November to develop strategies they could bring back and share with peers in their own communities. Five members of the group had already taken part in webinars, tasked with creating a logo for the initiative. They unveiled their picks (created by youth) at the November meet-up, and participants voted on their favourite.

During the two-day event, teens were encouraged to get their creative juices flowing by doodling and playing with Play-Doh. A graffiti wall was created to document “aha” moments, and a “chill room” was provided to allow teens to decompress if they found the discussions about mental health overwhelming.

Alicia Raimundo, a mental-health advocate and speaker for TEDx (part of a global speaking series), talked to the teens about her own struggles with depression and anxiety, urging them to “...educate yourself, learn about mental health...and create an environment for people (who are experiencing challenges) so they know they're never alone.”

“You...are enough to change the world, and that is truly revolutionary,” she said.

Students were asked to document their challenges on paper pasted to the walls. They answered questions such as “how are students coping/why are students using substances?” Peer pressure, escape, relationships, and exams were just some of the reasons listed, and students spent the better part of an hour talking about their own stressful experiences and coping strategies.

They were also asked to provide potential solutions to their stressors. Some ideas included: a puppy room; a breakfast program; and a chill room similar to the one provided at the training. Students will try to determine if these ideas are feasible in their own school communities.

Tristen Dubois, 16, from New Liskeard (two hours north of North Bay), is hoping to open a booth at his school to help raise awareness of mental-health challenges. “People see mental health as a

shake-it-off kind of thing,” he said. “It's cool to teach people, to help them learn more about what it actually is.”

On day two, the students reviewed an online mental-health quiz developed by mindyourmind. They were asked to devise additional questions to those already on the quiz, such as: self-harm is a coping strategy, true or false? What are the signs of stress? True or false: you can call a distress line to talk about a friend who you think is in crisis.

The students who participated in the November training will add their own quiz questions, and will promote the quiz to their local peers in the hope of raising more awareness around mental health.

Upon completion of the two-day event, the students qualified as “youth leads,” and were ready to start planning activities in their own schools, with the help of adult allies. The youth leads will train peers – called youth champions – in their school communities, and all will work together to create youth-engagement strategies.

“They were pumped,” says Kristi McCracken, a public health nurse who works at John Diefenbaker Secondary School (JDSS) in Hanover, about an hour south of Owen Sound. She attended the training as YMHAC project co-ordinator for the Grey Bruce Health Unit, which is an RNAO Best Practice Spotlight Organization (in fact, most health units participating in this initiative are BPSOs). In the latter role, she oversees five schools in the area and supports youth involved in the project to lead in-school activities that help to promote positive mental wellness and stigma reduction. She does this by ensuring “super supportive” principals and teachers are aware of the project and on-board with students' ideas.

At JDSS, for example, students observe a “mindful minute” in some classrooms. This means there are two dedicated minutes of breathing and stretching before class begins. Youth leads who implemented this strategy introduced the idea at an all-school assembly meeting in December. They are hoping the initiative will take hold, particularly around exam time. Their goal is to

have all classes participate in the exercise.

More than 40 students will be trained as leads during this school year in Grey Bruce. They, in turn, will coach more peers.

“They're proud of their work,” says McCracken. “I'm passionate about making this continue.”

Anastasia Jaffray, 16, attends Toronto's Michel Power/St. Joseph High School. She was grateful to meet people from other parts of Ontario at the two-day training. “Mental health...affects everyone; it doesn't matter how big or small your city is,” she says. “It's nice to see how many different schools got involved.”

Brenagh Rapoport, 15, from Toronto's Vaughan Road Academy, says the training resonated with her because members of her family and friends have struggled with their mental health. “You can take the day off school if you have the flu, but if you have a panic attack, you're expected to be in school,” she says. “(Mental-health issues are) seen as more trivial...as something you can deal with and move on.”

“I definitely want to stay involved in the fight...against stigma, (and to raise) awareness on mental-health issues,” Rapoport adds. “That's something I'm very passionate about...(and) being here for these two days has only reinforced that.” **RN**

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