

Opinion Piece

A little knowledge isn't a dangerous thing!

Dr Mark Beirne

Over recent years, there have been increasing efforts to raise awareness about the health of our young people, and in particular the mental health of our young men which is coming under increasing pressure, partly due to the unhealthy state of our economy. This week is (International) Mens' Health Week (10-16 June).

Early identification of mental health problems can make recovery much more likely.

As guys, the stereotype is that they don't (or won't) talk about their feelings because to do so is 'unmanly'. Keeping the head up, getting on with things even when you feel lousy, snapping out of it is what's expected.

Another reason young men don't open up relates to the stigma of having a mental illness. Being on an inhaler for asthma is usually no big deal, but telling your mates you're taking medication or having counselling to treat an illness which starts in the brain (but can affect nearly every other part of the body indirectly!) is still far less likely to happen.

But knowledge of the symptoms of various mental illnesses, how commonly they occur, what's involved in treatment and how the impact that all of this can have on your relationships and what matters to you can certainly make it more likely that a young person will recognize the symptoms in themselves or someone close to them and be more likely to get help.

Advertising campaigns, social media (such as www.spunout.ie, www.headstrong.ie & www.reachout.com) and education in schools (the SPHE Curriculum) can all help get that information out there. A Hospital in Dublin, as part of their efforts to demystify mental illness, began taking in Transition Year students from schools throughout Ireland for week-long placements, which combined work experience in the business departments of the hospital in the mornings with talks on mental health topics in the afternoon from mental health professionals. Team members from Psychiatry, Psychology, Nursing, Social Work and Occupational Therapy gave sessions on stigma and mental health, self care, major difficulties such as depression, anxiety and deliberate self harm, as well as describing different types of treatment. Case examples and scenarios were also used to help learning. These placements proved popular amongst schools and have kept running.

Last year, I worked on some research with two colleagues which looked at the knowledge and attitudes of two of these Transition Year Student groups with regard to mental health, just as they were about to start their week and at the very end of the week to see what they thought and knew *before and after*. The findings were encouraging.

In all, 24 students participated, the majority had gone to school with, had observed in passing, had a friend of the family or a relative with a mental illness. The scores by the end of the week indicated that the sessions had an impact on most of these views.

Their attitudes to individuals with mental illness regarding desire to be employed, treatment effectiveness (both medication and counselling), assistance (they could provide to a friend or family member) and recovery were encouraging, even at the start of the week, but even more so at the end. Their responses immediately after the week indicated that they thought medication and counselling were very effective treatments, that they were confident they could give friends the right advice about getting professional help and that even with severe mental illness, full recovery was possible. There was a view, however, that those with mental illness were somewhat reluctant to seek professional help.

A very large Irish study (the *My World Survey*) examined the mental health of over 14,000 young people living in Ireland between the ages of 12 and 25. It was published in 2012 and is available for free on www.headstrong.ie. It confirmed that young men are less likely to seek help and talk about their problems. The study also found that rates of suicidal thoughts, self-harm and suicide attempts were higher in young adults who did not seek help or talk about their problems.

Talking about problems is associated with lower mental health distress and higher positive adjustment.

‘Turning Words into Actions’ by admitting there’s a problem and getting help could be the bravest (and best) thing a young man can do.

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Note to editor: The College of Psychiatrists of Ireland is highlighting Youth Mental Health in 2013 (which covers the age range of 15 to 25). A series of events and activities have and will take place throughout 2013 raising various aspects of youth mental health and illness for college members and the general public. Dr Beirne’s opinion piece focussing on young men’s mental health to mark International Men’s Health Week (MHW) 2013 is part of those activities.

The theme for Men’s Health Week 2013 in Ireland is: "Action Men - Turning Words into Actions" (see <http://www.mhfi.org/mhw/mhw-2013.html>.) The purpose of International Men’s Health Week is to heighten the awareness of preventable health problems and encourage early detection and treatment of disease and health difficulties among men and boys. MHW always begins on the Monday before Father’s Day and ends on Father’s Day itself. It is celebrated in most European countries, as well as in the USA, Australia, New Zealand and a number of other places worldwide.

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