

Mental health for children and youth - how to get the help you need

by Dr. David Smith

For children and teenagers in BC, coping well with the demands of school work, busy schedules and social relationships in today's chaotic world reflects resilient mental health. But some BC children and youth are unable to cope well with the daily stresses of their lives and the results can be debilitating or tragic.

An estimated 13 per cent of youth in BC each year experience a mental health issue —that means up to 83,700 children under the age of 19 in BC may be suffering. Studies show that receiving appropriate help at the right time may enable a child or youth to return to good health or prevent the escalation of symptoms, warding off larger crises or more chronic illnesses, and even at times saving young lives.

But unfortunately, the majority of youth experiencing a mental health issue, or their families, do not seek help. Why is this? There are likely a number of key factors: youth and family may lack understanding about mental health issues or may be unable to recognise the symptoms of a mental health problem; they may not know how to access the right services, who to see, or how to navigate BC's mental health system; they may be worried about possible stigma, or labelling, and hoping it is simply a "phase" that will pass.

As an adolescent and adult psychiatrist working for the last 11 years in Interior Health (IH), I appreciate how frightening and worrying it can be for youth and families when a mental health issue arises. But I also know that the right help can make all the difference and that good recovery is possible even with some of the most serious of mental health concerns. And "help" does not always mean treatment with medication. In fact, many mental health problems in children and youth can be very successfully treated with other techniques, particularly Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), which, in essence, teaches skills to address the thoughts, feelings and behaviors that underlie a mental health problem.

Working with a group of mental health colleagues in the Interior and on Vancouver Island—including families with lived experience, mental health clinicians from the Ministry of Children and Family Development, health authority professionals, school counsellors, family doctors, pediatricians and others — we have come up with a series of short columns to run in this paper to help youth and families recognize and understand some common mental health concerns. In 10 articles, we will talk about issues like anxiety, depression, substance use, eating disorders, obsessive compulsive disorder, schizophrenia and family support. We will help you recognize the symptoms and know when and how to seek help. We will talk about successful skills, actions and treatments. These columns, as well as running in your local paper, can also be found at <http://www.sharedcarebc.ca> so you can access them online or share with friends and family.

Numerous high quality websites are producing up to date information about a wide variety of mental health concerns and in each column, we will link you to online resources in BC for more information on each condition. A few excellent provincial sites to check out now include: openmindbc.ca; mindcheck.ca, forcesociety.ca, and keltymentalhealth.ca.

Next column, we will talk about anxiety.

Dr. David Smith is an adolescent and adult psychiatrist and the medical director of the Okanagan Psychiatric services for Interior Health. This series of columns on common child and youth mental health issues is a project of the [Child and Youth Mental Health and Substances Use Collaborative](#). The Collaborative involves multiple individuals, organizations and ministries all working together to increase the number of children, youth, and their families receiving timely access to mental health services and support in the Interior Health and Vancouver Island regions. The Collaborative is jointly funded by Doctors of BC and the government of BC.