
Reducing stigma from mental illness and getting the family support you need

by **Dr. David Smith**

When a child or teenager is diagnosed with a serious illness like cancer or organ failure, friends and neighbors often drop off casseroles or ask how they can help. The community rallies around the effected family to buoy them with support in their time of need.

Not so —at least until now — when the diagnosis is a mental health issue. In fact, parents often say that their journey through the medical system, education, and social services, as well as society at large, with a child or youth with a mental health issue is one of the most lonely, isolating and emotionally difficult they have ever faced. "My daughter's struggle with severe depression was more difficult for me than my husband's sudden death," said one mother, who is a family representative in the Interior's Child and Youth Mental Health Collaborative. "After he died, people brought food, came by to watch my kids, let me cry and talk. When my daughter got ill, people stayed far away, but I needed more support than ever."

Keli Anderson, co-founder of The [F.O.R.C.E](#) Society for Mental Health (Families Organized for Recognition and Care Equality) knows that experience well. Her young son began showing behavioural problems and mental health issues 22 years ago at the age of 5, which turned out to be very early-onset bipolar disorder. Anderson felt shamed, blamed and completely on her own to navigate confusing and uncompassionate systems and an indifferent society. So the BC mother along with another mother facing the same challenges started The F.O.R.C.E. to provide support, information, understanding and advocacy for families with children and youth with mental health issues. One of their popular and very helpful programs is the "Parent In Residence" and "Youth in Residence" positions in various regions, staffed by individuals with lived experience in child and youth mental health who help those just encountering the system, or any way along their journey.

Thanks to the work of organizations like The F.O.R.C.E — which truly has become a force in BC for family support and advocacy — as well as the growth of other support organizations, families are no longer so alone. Youth and families are also front and centre in the Child and Youth Mental Health and Substance Use Collaborative, which started in the Interior a year ago and is now expanding to Vancouver Island. Jointly funded by the BC government and Doctors of BC, the Collaborative is bringing families and youth together with a wide array of BC mental health professionals, including clinicians from the Ministry of Children and Family Development, physicians, school counsellors, community agencies, the RCMP and more. Together the more than 350 members of the Collaborative are working to improve timely access and integration of child and youth mental health services in the province by working on local action teams in various communities, and finding solutions to system barriers through Working Groups. This series of seven columns is part of the work to improve mental health awareness and reduce barriers to care.

Fortunately, the unnecessary stigma that has surrounded mental illness for decades is finally beginning to lessen. An increasing number of articulate, compassionate and public individuals are coming forward to tell their personal stories of life with a mental illness. Public individuals like Olympic athlete Clara Hughes, CBC radio host Sheilagh Rogers, actress Catherine Zeta Jones, and comedian Robin Williams have all raised awareness and understanding, and reduced stigma to unprecedented levels.

Youth, too, are coming forward in schools and communities to share their experiences and help others make the path less isolating. This growing openness and recognition is helping all of us understand that mental illness touches us all and that fostering mental wellness is a task for every one of us.

The [Child and Youth Mental Health and Substance Use Collaborative](#) has received funding through to 2016 and is determined to make the experience for youth and families much more timely, efficient, effective and less isolating. While we still have a way to go, with increased education and awareness, better integration of services, more family support and advocacy, as well as reduced levels of stigma, the future is growing ever brighter for children, youth and families experiencing mental health issues.

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.

