Breaking down barriers in youth mental health

By Kerry Searle*

The stigma surrounding mental health issues is slowly dissipating as more and more public figures open up about their issues.

When it comes to young people however, there is still significant stigma, misinformation and plain old embarrassment about sharing difficult emotions, particularly with adults. In fact, it can be very difficult for young people to identify their feelings at all, let alone share them with others. If they feel like talking, it will most likely be with their friends, which is why we believe it’s important to empower young people with information on how they can help each other.

As a Psychologist with Youth Mental Health in the Illawarra Shoalhaven Local Health District, we work with young people aged between 14 and 24 who are starting to show signs they are having trouble with their mental health. We also work with young people in groups, for example in schools, to help increase their knowledge and skills in dealing with mental health problems.

Many young people experience common disorders such as depression and anxiety; in fact around about 1 in 4 young people will have some sort of mental health problem. Early intervention can nip these issues in the bud before they become major problems, but the real challenge is getting those young people through the door of a mental health service.

In the Illawarra/Shoalhaven we are pioneering a new program to increase young people’s understanding of mental illness, improve their ability to identify risk factors and reduce the stigma surrounding mental health problems.

By doing this, we hope that young people will gain confidence in identifying risk factors and play an important role in encouraging their friends to seek help.

The program is based around an interactive theatre performance by a new Illawarra- based not-for-profit organisation called Mind Blank. The piece, entitled Understanding Depression: Fill in the Blanks is based on the true story of Dan, a young person who suffered clinical depression. The actors tell Dan’s life story on stage with the audience invited to suggest ways for him to overcome difficulties. The ABC recently described it as “choose-your-own-adventure style theatre”.

The first two Healthy Minds Theatre performances took place at the Shoalhaven Entertainment Centre and the University of Wollongong in October 2011 and June 2012, and targeted senior students, carers and school teachers, with community service providers invited to participate. It will be run again in October 2012 in the Shoalhaven. While we are
assessing its success through research, we have received a lot of positive feedback and now several schools around the region are about to implement the program. While everyone involved in youth mental health is passionate about what they do, it is important that we continually look for ways to engage young people and make it easier for them to get help.

While we accept that young people withdraw from their parents, we all need to be aware that when a young person starts to withdraw from their friends and things they enjoy, alarm bells should start ringing.

We need to understand the barriers and find a way around them. It's not about telling young people what to do, but about educating them on how to look after themselves by getting exercise, eating well, staying away from drugs and alcohol, finding hobbies and things they enjoy and staying connected with their friends, family and community.

Young people can access a variety of services, for example, Headspace and psychology services via their GP.

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