

Keeping an eye on our children's mental health

Mark Pavilons



For many of us Boomers, we never thought much about mental health or mental illness.

During my high school and college days, things were a bit simpler. Sure, we had stress and had to deal with the whole self-image, fitting in ordeals and general teen angst.

Our parents weren't much help either and there was a lack of information and research in this area.

Today, we have the tools to recognize, diagnose and treat all sorts of minor and major mental health issues.

The sad thing is, it seems to be prevalent among our youth today.

I attended a seminar recently by a pair of child health practitioners at a school in Bolton. They shared some valuable tips from their 30 years of expertise in the field.

What struck me as surprising was the number of moms and dads in the audience, all of whom are obviously concerned about their kids. Parent council events typically draw a handful of parents, but this event saw roughly 100 turn out for some much needed advice.

The statistics are not reassuring in the least.

Anxiety disorders, the most common mental health disorder in children and teens, affect kids as young as four or five. Roughly 70% of mental health issues begin in childhood or adolescence.

We all have to deal with how we see ourselves and our place in society. We all experience stress, fear, anxiety and yes, depression. It's how we react that's the key. If we can handle all these stressors, it won't impact how we think, feel and act. But if we let these forces take over, our mental health suffers.

We all know about nutrition and keeping our bodies healthy, but it's equally vital to maintain our mental health.

The funny thing about anxiety and worrying is that 40% of the things we worry about never happen! Another 30% have already happened and we can't do anything about it. Some of us, yours truly included, worry needlessly about health concerns that turn out to be nothing. We all have those petty issues that really don't deserve our anxiety. So in the end, maybe 8% of our anxiety is justified.

An adult may be capable of understanding this and compartmentalizing our worries. Young people are less equipped to deal with it, and don't talk about it or even know what's bothering them.

All of our kids act out, worry, withdraw and become derailed from time to time. Some act out in anger and others become shy and reclusive. Are those recurring tummy aches real, or stress-related?

The best first dose of parental medicine is encouraging our kids to talk openly about their problems. Part of our job description is helping where we can, and bringing our wisdom and personal experiences to the table. While my kids may not appreciate my taste in music, personal problems haven't changed in hundreds of years.

In my youth, we tended to spend most of our days outside, playing and just monkeying around. We learned most of our social skills out of necessity, on the playground or sports field. We had to find our own solutions, mitigate grievances and stick up for one another. Problem-solving may have involved dirt and rocks, but we eventually sorted it out.

Today, many of our kids are interacting online, or learning through playing video games. While that may make our teen boys great snipers and car thieves, I don't know what value these things have.

One of the worst feelings we have as parents is that of helplessness, and watching our kids suffer. We are their front line mental health managers.

Like any skill or kicking a bad habit, our brains have to be retrained and rewired to learn new ways of coping. It's practise and repetition that builds these new neurological bridges.

The key, according to the experts, is resilience. The ability to bounce back, learn from our mistakes, overcome the odds and keep our anxiety in check is what aids in our emotional health. We are by nature resilient creatures and every lesson in life, or even tragedy, makes us stronger. It's a continual learning process that really never ends.

There are some really interesting neurological battles that take place in our brains. We have several major centres that govern our behaviour ? the logical, cognitive lobes and the emotional amygdala. These centres are often at odds and the term ?flip your lid??is actually quite accurate. When we're responding emotionally and perhaps irrationally, we literally flip a switch and our amygdala takes over.

We have to accept that we're emotional creatures and that emotions govern our decisions and our actions.

It's often said when referring to addiction is that the first step is admitting it to yourself. In mental health issues, that's also true.

Admitting that anxiety is hurting our way of thinking and behaving is half the battle. Learning how to deal with it is the other half.

It's okay to look for solutions and ask for help.

Fortunately, there are many resources for parents and kids on coping strategies.

As parents, we need to be aware of changes in our kids' behaviour and the possible sources of their conflict. They need to know they're not alone and that we're here for them, every minute of every day.

Together, we can heal, learn from one another, and ultimately become healthier, in mind, body and soul.