Ontario Society of Occupational Therapists

May 31, 2019

Mental Health Commission of Canada

Re: Consultation on Shaping Canada's Post Secondary Mental Health Standard

The Ontario Society of Occupational Therapists is pleased to provide input to the CMHC's consultation to support development of Canada's Post Secondary Mental Health Standard. The Society is the provincial professional association of over 4500 occupational therapists and student occupational therapists who serve clients in Ontario.

Occupational therapists are regulated health professionals who work with clients who experience barriers to managing the daily occupations of life such as self care, school, work, participating in one's community and social network, etc. as a result of health related or social issues. Mental health issues can impact an individual's ability to function and occupational therapists are ideal mental health professionals to assist individuals to identify barriers, to engage in tailored and effective interventions, and to promote engagement in the meaningful occupations they need and want to do.

What works well to promote student mental health?

1. **Access to counselling and skill development**: Students are developing and practicing important life skills and emotion skills (developmental age from 16-24). Having access to tailored, effective interventions that help them develop themselves and build skills are important. This includes social skills, emotion regulations skills, healthy relationships skills, self-esteem, self-compassion, etc.

2. **Social support**: Some students are isolated and lack social support to help them get through the transition from high school to university. Many factors contribute to this sense of isolation (e.g. social anxiety / stressful family life / lack of social opportunities, etc). As a result, students don't have peer support to help them with assignments or social support to develop skills to navigate the changes.

3. **Accommodations:** Students who are experiencing significant life stressors or mental illness would benefit from accommodation. It is important that faculty have an attitude of willingness to be flexible and understanding. It is important for them to have education and awareness of mental health and mental illness. If they are able to be flexible, they can accept some disclosure from students and give a message of acceptance re: the students' experiences. We notice that at times, students who do not have formal accommodations (e.g. they are not yet in place or they are experiencing a situationally challenging life stressor) are shut down and shamed (e.g. "there were no extensions back then"), leading to decreased help seeking behaviours. There is a

sense of hopelessness instead of a partnership with the faculty.

4. **Opportunities for wellness**: Students are going through different milestones during their 4-5 years of university. It's important for them to engage in other interests while in school. Being able to balance academic demands and other important life roles (e.g. seeing friends, doing leisure activities, exercise, etc.), and having environmental support to manage the balancing is helpful.

5. **Culture of wellness**: It's important to examine the type of messages coming from faculty and university. For wellness and mental health to matter, the president, provost office, dean's office and management teams need to also embody and prioritize mental health and wellness both in their messages to students and in making it a priority as part of the school culture. Students are aware when their professors and school care about them or not, and it matters.

Which promising and best practice are you aware of promoting student mental health?

We offer the following examples of important practices and strategies to promote student mental health;

- Post-secondary student mental health framework: https://healthycampuses.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/The-National-Guide.pdf
- Centre for Innovation in Campus Mental Health: https://campusmentalhealth.ca/
- Initiatives like "Campus Connected" (connect and supporting students and peers). https://studentlife.uoit.ca/services/health-and-wellness/mental-health-services/groups-and-initiatives/index.php
- Student Led advisories and initiatives. Peer Support. (Available in many universities)
- Mood Walk: https://campusmentalhealth.ca/interviews/mood-walks/
- Various universities are participating in Bell Let's Talk: https://letstalk.bell.ca/en/news/1182/post-secondary-students-promote-mental-wellness-on-campus
- Stepped Care Approach: https://campusmentalhealth.ca/toolkits/campus-community-connection/models-frameworks/stepped-care-model/

What barriers do students face?

1. **Institutional barriers and policies**: Different programs have different course requirements. For example, some require that students take 6 courses (instead of the usual 5) or students aren't able to take the courses part-time. This impacts students who have other life responsibilities (e.g. caregiving, jobs) to balance with school.

2. **Lack of resources**: Barriers can stem from a variety of resource limitations including family (e.g. students who need to work and contribute to their families in financial ways), community (e.g. wait list for services in the community) and academic (e.g. wait list for services or limited access to faculty).
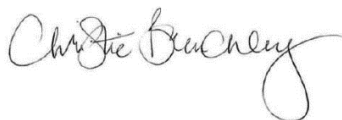
3. **Attitudinal barriers**: Some students develop significant symptoms as the school year progresses. As they work through their symptoms, they sometimes face bias or attitude that are not supportive (e.g. blaming language when withdrawing from courses past deadline or mark deductions for using cues during presentations).

4. **Stigma**: Although there has been a change about being accepting and open about accessing mental health supports, stigma still exists related to seeking mental health support. There is a need to frame mental health and well-being as something important for everyone.

What would you like post-secondary institutions to address?

1. **Identification of need**: Explore specific needs of students so services can match these needs. Having a comprehensive awareness of students' concerns are helpful in designing programs to support them.

2. **Access to Resources:** Find effective ways to access financial grants and effectively use financial resources so many students will benefit. Invest in mental health as an important part of developing students' capacity.

3. **Service delivery**: Explore different ways to deliver support if universities are implementing the stepped care approach.

4. **Administrative work**: Explore strategies to provide accessible/easier ways for students to get support. Students often navigate around paperwork / systemic barriers. There needs to be a balance between accountability and reasonable removal of barriers (e.g. paying for medical forms when students don't have financial resources)

5. **Representation**: It is important for students, service providers and relevant stakeholders to have a voice in policy development. It is also critical for campus leaders to support mental health initiatives.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input. OSOT would be pleased to provide clarification and to participate in any future consultations. Please don't hesitate to make contact at 416-322-3011 or by email at cbrenchley@osot.on.ca.

Sincerely,

Christie Brenchley
Executive Director