

Sun Life Financial Chair puts adolescent mental health on the map

Mental health is now firmly embedded in Nova Scotia's school system—thanks to the leadership of Dr. Stan Kutcher, Sun Life Financial Chair in Adolescent Mental Health, and the enthusiastic support of government and school board officials, teachers, parents, health professionals and many others across the province.

“We know that 15 to 20 per cent of young people suffer from mental disorders,” notes Dr. Kutcher, a professor, psychiatrist and leading world expert in adolescent mental health. “School is the place to reach them before their problems become serious.”

Dr. Kutcher and his team are working with many different partners to develop, test, refine, implement and evaluate training programs and educational materials that cover the critical years from junior high to university, and to put systems in place so problems are recognized early and kids are referred to the appropriate services.

“We've approached teen mental health from every angle, creating materials about how to achieve and maintain mental health, how to manage mental health risks, how to recognize mental disorders, and how to get help—for teens themselves and for parents, teachers, and guidance counsellors,” Dr. Kutcher says. “From there, we've launched ‘train the trainer’ sessions with educators in every school board in Nova Scotia, so each board now has mental health experts who can provide their colleagues with the knowledge and tools they need to effectively teach the mental health curriculum we've developed.”

Dr. Kutcher is also working with colleagues in Ontario, BC, Portugal, Brazil, Malawi, Zambia and other countries to test the effectiveness of these school-based mental health promotion and mental disorder prevention and early intervention programs. Knowledge gained through these studies is applied in NS as well as the partner provinces and nations.

At the same time, Dr. Kutcher and his team are striving to build health care systems' capacity to help young people with mental disorders. They've embarked on research projects in BC and NB to determine how best to improve the ability of family physicians, nurses, nurse practitioners and other primary care providers to recognize and diagnose mental disorders and provide effective first-line treatments. “We're transforming the landscape of teen mental health, removing obstacles of stigma and creating new pathways to care,” he says. “The results so far have been outstanding.”