

*Addressing stigma created a severe access problem – OPA has the solutions*

Thanks to campaigns such as “*Bell Let’s Talk*” there has been a reduction in the stigma that prevented so many people from seeking help for mental disorders. Now that people are willing to talk about their psychological distress and mental impairments, they are demanding access to quality mental healthcare. Quality mental healthcare includes access to evidence-based psychological interventions with proven effectiveness.

Our healthcare system was built on the principle of equity. Equity does not mean equal access to care. It means that those most in need having the best access to the highest quality of care possible. The healthcare system provides equitable access to care in most areas of practice. Unfortunately, Ontario’s mental health system is causing an escalation in distress rather than providing the solution to people’s problems. Those most in the need of care are often the last to receive it. Too many people expecting to receive care in the public sector are suffering, deteriorating or even choosing death by suicide when the system proves incapable to meeting their needs.

Ontarians tell us that they can access their family doctor and receive medications that may or may not be helpful for their mental disorders. Indeed, costly medications often produce side effects that are more difficult to live with than the condition itself. If the family doctor is unable to assist, patients are placed on long waiting lists to see a psychiatrist. Eventually, when they are seen, they may receive a potentially more accurate diagnosis and a change of drugs. Community-based mental health and addition agencies largely employ health providers able to address psychosocial problems. Individuals suffering from psychological impairment, however, require a higher level of expertise from a health professional that can provide comprehensive assessment, diagnosis and treatment services.

Those with extended health benefits or deep pockets can access same-day care by the most well - trained mental health professionals in the province – psychologists and psychological associates. But those without are left on waiting lists for up to two years for publicly-funded services. Psychologists and psychological associates are concerned about Ontario’s two-tiered mental health system which does not allow equitable access for the most vulnerable amongst us.

The Ontario Psychological Association not only advocates for access to mental health services, including psychological interventions, but we are finding sensible, efficient and cost-effective ways to do so.

***Some of our recent initiatives include:***

**The Psychology Directory:** The public, government, physicians, lawyers, insurance companies, WSIB, professional associations, school boards, the press, etc. need to know how to locate a psychologist or psychological associate in the right geographic area with the right specialty and the right level of expertise given the issue or the practice population. The Psychological Directory will be a robust, interactive web-based directory that will highlight the individual knowledge and skills of our Members and provide information about the collective clinical, teaching and research strengths of our Members across the province.

**Psychology Aid Ontario:** Building on the model of Legal Aid Ontario and accessed through the OPA's Psychology Directory, the OPA will identify psychologists and psychological associates who are willing to provide assessment, diagnosis and treatment for individuals who cannot normally afford access to psychological interventions. This program will be a major benefit to the public and will provide an opportunity for our members to be publicly recognized for the pro-bono and sliding scales that are already provided in our private practices. This program will need financial support to meet the needs, first and foremost, for the following:

1. Children and adolescents and their families suffering from complex mental disorders and addictions, including young people in the care of the CAS
2. Persons with severe persistent mental disorders, especially those that find themselves in the justice system
3. The homeless population with mental disorders including acquired brain injuries and addictions
4. Victims of sexual and/or domestic abuse or other violent crimes
5. First Responders who need immediate care – while waiting for a WSIB response, and 6. Seniors with multiple co-morbidities including depression, anxiety and dementia overlays.

**The OPA Centre of Excellence in Mental Health and Psychological Safety:** The OPA and our Members have become recognized as provincial leaders in the assessment, diagnosis and treatment of Occupational Stress Disorders (PTSD and other conditions exacerbated by the workplace conditions). Our work with First Responders (police, firefighters, paramedics, correctional officers, 911 dispatchers) and other health care professionals such as emergency and palliative care nurses exposed on a daily basis to trauma in the workplace has led to the development of certificate program in mental health and psychological safety in the workplace. The centre will build upon this work to conduct research, educate and provide access to clinically competent providers to ensure that Ontario's workforce receive the supports they need to remain psychologically healthy.

**The Psychology Resource Centre AND The OPA Centre of Excellence in Research and Continuing Education:** The OPA is justifiably proud of the accomplishments of our academics and researchers. We wish to develop a Research into Practice model that anchors our continuing education programs and showcases our research and teaching excellence. The Psychological Resource Centre will be a section on our website that will display influential psychology policy documents, research papers and dissertations, clinical and practice guidelines, patient education books, articles, brochures, helpful websites and other practice support tools. The Resource Centre will have two levels – one for the general public and the second to inform the work of Ontario's psychologists, psychological associates and the other disciplines that we teach and support to provide care to the full scope of their practices.

While the Ontario Psychological Association is a strong and vibrant organization of dedicated and highly professional mental healthcare providers, we cannot fill the gaps in the mental healthcare system in isolation. Through collaboration with government and other healthcare professionals we can transform the system so that it provides equitable access to the evidence-based psychological services that the public needs and is now, thanks to stigma reduction, demanding.