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Youth Mental Illness: "I Might Blow My Head Off"

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Annette was an avid recreational target-shooter with her own rifle. One day Alexander, her 15-year-old son, begged her to get the gun out of the house. When she asked him why, his reply was chilling:

"Because I might blow my head off."

Annette has asked us not to use her real name because of her job in the federal government. However she wants to share her story about the challenges facing young Canadians who are coping with mental illness. Like many parents, she's found out communities lack the resources to support young people in their quest for mental health.

In 2007, Annette -- an Ottawa mother of three -- divorced her husband. He moved across the country, and out of their lives completely. The breakup was difficult for the family, but Alexander took it hardest. The oldest of the children, he was the closest to their father.

"He grieved deeply and keenly," Annette says.

Fortunately Annette holds a senior position in the federal civil service and could afford a therapist to help Alexander cope with his grief and anger.

Alexander, who was overweight, became a target for local bullies.

Despite therapy, by the summer of 2011, Alexander spiralled into deep depression. Then came the gun incident. Even though it was properly locked up, Annette immediately got the weapon out of the house.

The next day she hit the phones, calling the school guidance counsellor, the therapist, their family doctor -- anyone who might help manage the crisis.

The therapist couldn't fit them in until four days later, the doctor -- five days. When Alexander finally saw the doctor, she prescribed a low dosage of Prozac.

Alexander's depression deepened. He began having anxiety attacks. With the help of her sister and hired nanny, Annette checked in on her son every hour. By the start of October, they were watching him every minute. Annette gathered the kitchen knives and hid them.

Finally, days before Thanksgiving, Alexander agreed to be admitted to the mental health unit at Ottawa's Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario.

When Alexander's condition stabilized after a few weeks and he left the hospital, Annette discovered there was no follow-up plan, nor any psychiatrists available for over a month.

Annette searched in vain for community resources. "There was the appearance of many supports in the community, but really there's nothing there," she tells us.

Finally her sister stumbled across the Ottawa Youth Services Bureau, which offered support services at a location in a mall near their home. Alexander began attending sessions twice a week.

Meanwhile, Alexander struggled to find the courage to return to school, with the aid of an attentive guidance counsellor. Beyond that, the school provided no assistance. School administrators arranged a meeting with a social worker and a psychiatrist, but after that meeting they never saw the social worker again. The psychiatrist they saw just once more -- that November when Alexander had to be taken off Prozac because it was causing suicidal impulses.

Finally in December another psychiatrist became available to work long-term together with Alexander and Annette. Today Alexander is also enrolled in a private school designed to meet the needs of youth like him. He works out at a gym, boosting mental health with physical health.

Annette tells us he is thriving now, happy and talking about his future. However, Annette barely manages to cover the costs despite her high government salary.

"What happens to mothers who don't have that?" she asks.

Joanne Lowe, Executive Director of the Ottawa Youth Services Bureau and Co-Chair of the Ottawa Community Suicide Prevention

Network, tells us one in five youth will experience a mental illness in their lifetime. The Canadian Mental Health Association reports a staggering 3.2 million young.

Canadians between 12 and 19 are at risk of developing depression. We lose 4,000 young people every year to suicide and the suicide rate among our Inuit youth is one of the highest in the world.

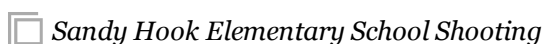
Although some provinces like Alberta have made strides in increasing mental health resources in their communities, Lowe says the resources available across Canada are "woefully insufficient."

"Child and youth mental health is the orphan of an already quite orphaned system," she tells us. Lowe says Canada needs a national strategy that promotes mental health awareness, including "mental health literacy" in schools; prevents mental disorders by addressing risk factors like bullying; increases the availability of mental health services; and invests in research.

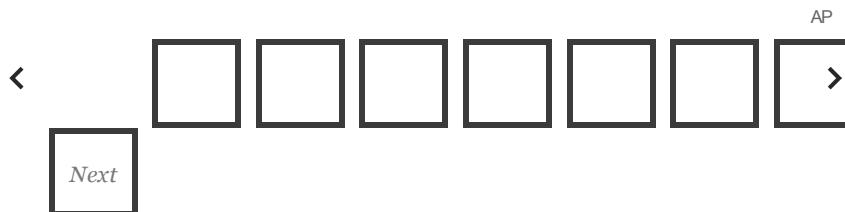
The story of Annette and Alexander has a fairly happy ending. Not all such stories do.

To create more hopeful outcomes, Canada must develop a national strategy for youth mental health, committed to creating accessible and comprehensive resources and support in every community.

Craig and Marc Kielburger are founders of international charity and educational partner, Free The Children. Its youth empowerment event, We Day, is in eight cities across Canada this year, inspiring more than 100,000 attendees. For more information, visit www.weday.com or follow Craig on Twitter at @craigkielburger



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