



*383 Parkdale Avenue, Suite 402
Ottawa (Ontario) K1Y 4R4
Tel.: (613) 729-6668
Fax : (613) 729-9608
E-mail : casw@casw-acts.ca*

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World Mental Health Day

The Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) acknowledges World Mental Health Day, first observed in 1992 by the World Federation for Mental Health, on October 10, 2007.

There is no single cause of mental health disorders, nor is anyone immune to developing a mental illness at some point in his or her life. Mental health disorders cross all cultural, socio-economic, gender, political, and religious differences. Worldwide, “hundreds of millions of people are affected by mental, behavioural, neurological and substance use disorders”, according to the World Health Organization (WHO). It is estimated that 154 million people suffer from depression alone, not to mention the millions suffering from schizophrenia and disorders related to alcohol and drug use. In addition, WHO reports, “877,000 people die by suicide every year.” In Canada, according to the Canadian Mental Health Association, “It is estimated that 1 in 5 people will be affected by mental illness at some point in their lives and that \$14.4 billion was spent on mental health related problems in Canada in 1998.”

Although mental illness has no single cause, social workers are well aware of the social determinants that can perpetrate mental health challenges. These include loss or lack of employment, lack of adequate housing, poverty, poor nutrition, isolation, and lack of accessibility to education. In addition, worldwide, more and more individuals and families are suffering from mental illness related to war, emigration, and displacement.

Since many marginalized individuals to whom social workers provide services are often unable to access the basic needs of life, it is no wonder that we find high rates of depression among disadvantaged people, especially those facing trauma. The Canadian Psychiatric Association estimates that, by 2020, depressive illnesses will become the second leading cause of the disease burden worldwide and the leading cause in developed countries like Canada.

Grave stigma and discrimination are associated with mental illness. Persons with mental illness experience this in the workplace, in their personal lives, and in society at large. Unfortunately, they also sometimes experience this discrimination in the health care system, facing long waiting periods for emergency treatment at hospitals while those with less critical physical ailments are seen first. For some, mental illness is invisible.

On this day, CASW sees the potential for change with the creation of the Canadian Mental Health Commission. It will be a great step forward if the Commission is able to meet its significant goals to reduce stigma, to promote the development of a national strategy to address mental illness, and to develop a knowledge exchange centre.

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For more information contact:
Veronica Marsman, President
Phone: (613) 729-6668
E-mail casw@casw-acts.ca