

HELP IS AVAILABLE

Recently, discussions about mental health have become numerous, visible and frequent. It's important that people are aware of any and all resources to provide support during particularly difficult times. There is a local initiative, now available online, which may be of help to you.

More openness about mental health issues is a positive development, given people's reluctance to acknowledge emotional distress. However, too many people with mental health issues are discouraged from seeking help by fear of being stigmatized. Those with depression often continue to feel shame for their inability to "cope." People with anxiety are told to "get over it" and "buck up." People responding to toxic workplaces often leave their employment or experience significant stress-related health problems.

The COVID-19 pandemic has only added to the burden of people with pre-existing mental health issues, and has negatively affected the mental health of many through disruption, loss and uncertainty.

People courageous enough to seek help too often find services inadequate. Even before COVID-19, available services were already over-stretched and often available only to those with the most serious problems. Others faced long waiting lists or the high cost of private therapy. To make matters worse, COVID-19 has increased the isolation, uncertainty and fear of illness of medical care providers. Increasingly stressful circumstances and overwhelming demands from multiple sources have contributed to greater strain and burnout among medical professionals.

People often turn to their family physicians for help. But limited by time constraints, insufficient training and increasing demands, many family physicians cannot respond to mental health needs, even when they urgently want to help.

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, or CBT, is a well-researched treatment option that can help people struggling with mood, anxiety, and stress. It is effective in treating a variety of mental health problems. The CBT Skills Society provides a group therapy program, largely funded by the Medical Services Plan and therefore of minimal cost to the individual. A number of psychiatrists and family physicians in Victoria initially received funding from the Shared Care Committee to develop this much-needed program for people unable to access existing services. Referred by family physicians, 15 participants in the 90- to

120-minute meetings learn how to better manage various mental health issues.

The program is intended to help individuals learn self-management skills to improve coping. It is not based on a psychotherapy model, where group members share in-depth personal information, but rather is an opportunity to learn, for example, about relieving tension through simple breathwork, recognizing and challenging unhelpful patterns of thinking, and practicing compassion towards one's personal struggles.

Since the program began in 2015, more than 6,000 individuals have participated in these groups. Feedback from them indicates an overwhelmingly positive response. Many family physicians are referring their patients and expressing gratitude for and satisfaction with the service.

As COVID-19 concerns increased in the spring of 2020, in-person meetings were no longer possible, and virtual group sessions using a Zoom platform replaced them. Facilitators, administrative staff and participants worked together to ensure accessibility and the confidence to use the virtual format. Before the shutdown, the Society was receiving 250 referrals monthly and providing up to 30 new groups every three months; things are going strong again with now 50 online groups offered quarterly, and almost 300 referrals were received in January 2021.

Before joining a group of strangers to try to more successfully deal with emotional difficulties, participants frequently expressed concern about what to expect. Feedback indicated that one of the most helpful, and reassuring, aspects of people's experience in the groups was discovering they were not alone in having mental health difficulties and that the group experience itself was immensely helpful. Participants in the virtual groups initially reported concern about joining an "electronic" group, but this has not been a substantial problem for the vast majority, and has, in fact, made it possible for many to participate who were unable to attend in-person groups..

A silver lining of the pandemic is that the online groups are now accessible to people from anywhere in the province, whereas previously groups were only available in Victoria, Vancouver and Nanaimo. People need to talk to their family physician, nurse practitioner, or walk-in-clinic physician to ensure the group is a fit for them, and once referred, registration is online, and people can join from the comfort of their homes.

More information is available on the CBT Skills Group Societys website, cbtskills.ca.

In addition to the CBT Skills Group program, there are other mental health services, including community groups such as the BC Association for Living Mindfully (BCALM), and services through the Canadian Mental Health Association and Anxiety Canada. Some offer individual support and others are group-based. Many are available virtually. More information and links are available at the CBT Skills Groups website.

Don't suffer alone or in silence. We are in this together, and the CBT Skills Groups and other services can provide the teaching and community to help you access your own resilience.

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