

A PROACTIVE APPROACH TOWARDS ADDICTIONS AND MENTAL ILLNESS IN THE CLASSROOM

by Allan Kehler

Growing up, I knew someone who was an exceptional student. He came to class prepared, submitted his assignments on time, and excelled academically. Friendships formed with ease, and peers elected him as the president of their school. He was the captain of sports teams and earned several athlete of the year awards.

Everything changed for this individual in grade 11. Teachers observed many changes in him, and they took notice as he failed to utilize his potential. His once pleasant and outgoing personality was exchanged for explosive outbursts and isolation. He fled from leadership roles and slipped into a different peer group. Despite teachers expressing their concerns to his parents, he graduated without a single one approaching him directly.

Later, he attended university where his mental health continued to deteriorate and he evolved into an addict. However, it was here that a professor did take notice. He opened his office doors, and expressed both empathy and understanding to this individual. But most of all, the professor listened. This teacher changed this young man's life.

This young man was me.

Today, I am on the other side of the classroom, and I will always remember the impact that Ian McNeill had on my life.

Numerous adolescents and young adults are challenged by mental illness, addictive tendencies, self-injurious behaviours and suicidal ideations. Individuals struggling with these issues will often distance themselves from both educators and peers. Do you feel that you have the ability to effectively recognize and manage these issues in your classroom?

As teachers, we have numerous roles and countless tasks, but to ignore the impact of mental illness and addictions in the classroom will only make our educational tasks more difficult. A lack of awareness can impact an educator's ability to truly connect with students who are challenged in these areas. If a student turns to a teacher for guidance in times of uncertainty, it is imperative that we have a plan in place to address these issues.

Mental health has received a lot of attention, but the prevalent issue of addictions often remains in the shadows. This is an area that is peppered with stigma and stereotypes, and demands to see the light. Statistics Canada reported that one in ten Canadians who are fifteen years and older display symptoms of alcohol or illicit drug dependence. In addition, countless students come from homes where a family member is challenged by addictions. These students' home environments can be unpredictable and chaotic. They may enter our classrooms depressed, angry, anxious, and have little interest in what we perceive to be important. If our students feel helpless, distracted or frustrated, the classroom may be the environment where they act these feelings out.

I believe that every student truly wants to succeed in the classroom. Every one of us has a basic need to belong, and we all have a desire to be seen and heard. Many students are not receiving these basic needs outside of the classroom walls. As teachers, we can become so focused on curriculum that we too fail to see our students' needs. These blinders cause us to scratch our heads, wondering why some students are not succeeding at an academic level, and why some are reaching out to drugs.

Teachers may be convinced that some of their students stay up the entire night plotting how to make their life a living hell. The reality is that the students' actions have nothing to do with the teacher, but are rather a reflection of their inner turmoil.

We need to take the time to discover what is driving the student's actions, and this begins with communication. Students who do not submit homework on time, have explosive outbursts, or fall asleep in class require a sincere conversation. They may have been up all night listening to their parents fighting, or perhaps they have been forced to take on the parental role for their siblings in the absence of an addicted parent.

Naturally, many of these students have their walls up in our classrooms, and they hesitate to let outsiders in. However, what message do we convey if we remain silent and fail to acknowledge their behaviours? The message I received as a high school student was that my teachers did not care about me.

I have found success in a simple, non-invasive approach. *"I don't mean to pry, but I just wanted to let you know that I am concerned. I just wanted to let you know that if you ever needed to talk, I would be happy to listen."*

This is certainly not to say that students will rush to you and pour out their heart and soul, but they now know that they have been seen, and they have an invitation to be heard. You have opened a door, and when they enter it is imperative that you meet them with sincerity, compassion and open ears.

As teachers, we are not counsellors, but we can certainly listen. We can also provide our students with available resources to assist them in their times of need. There is no need for us to walk

through those doors with them, but our own doors can remain open. While it is important to show them the way, we must also set boundaries so that we do not lose ourselves in the process.

As a professional speaker, I encourage my audience to use their voices in times of need. Silence continues to be the enemy of recovery, and I firmly believe that our voices can be one of our greatest tools. As educators, we must invest time and energy into our students. We need to encourage individuals to acknowledge their feelings and find their voices. It is imperative for students to understand that their feelings are valid, common, and that there are resources in society to help.

The issues of self-injurious behaviours, suicide and addictions continue to be greatly misunderstood. Ignorance simply means that people do not have the tools. I believe that information is power, and a deeper understanding provides individuals with the opportunity to make informed decisions. A proactive approach towards the issues of mental illness and addictions in the classroom can change a student's life. It certainly changed mine.

Allan Kehler B.Ed., B.PhEd. firmly believes that the first step to healing begins with a voice. After years of perseverance through mental illness and addictions, he now inspires others to speak of their own personal challenges. Allan is the author of *Stepping out From the Shadows: A Guide to Understanding & Healing From Addictions*. He has worked as an addictions counselor, and has instructed courses on addictions at the college level. As a member of the Canadian Association of Professional Speakers, his teaching has expanded outside of the classroom walls. For more information about Allan and his book, visit: outfromtheshadows.ca.

