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YOUTH STRUGGLING WITH SUICIDE 'ARE NOT ALONE'

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Editor's Note: This Metroland investigative series delves into the issue of teen suicide. This four-part series will cover the prevalence of teen suicide and the challenges youth face regarding the stigma related to mental health. It will feature help and resources available for young people struggling or in crisis and talk to survivors.

NORTHUMBERLAND/DURHAM - In December, Zak Rich, 15, and Zane Bergeron, 16, experienced the tragedy of the loss of a life that had barely just begun.

Losing their teenage friend to suicide left both Northumberland boys shaken and shocked. Wanting to make sure nothing like this happened again, they soon vowed to do what they could to make sure kids know: "It's OK to ask for help."

"It doesn't matter if it's two months later or two years from now, this is something we can't just forget," said Zane.

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Sarah Hyatt/Northumberland News

Zane Bergeron, 16, left, and Zak Rich, 15, have created an Instagram account focused on youth mental health after losing a friend to suicide. The two teens are working to encourage youth who are struggling to reach out and to give youth a voice when it comes to mental health.

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YOUTH NEEDING MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORTS ON THE 'RISE'

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And Zak and Zane are not alone.

Maybe it's a friend, a friend of a friend, a loved one, or your neighbour - but statistics suggest, and chances are, you know someone or of someone who has died by suicide.

Annually, at least 4,000 Canadians die by suicide, meaning an average of 10 people daily.

Of the leading causes of death in this country, suicide is ranked ninth in a Public Health Agency of Canada analysis of statistics. This analysis shows more people die by suicide than from kidney disease.

For youth, suicide remains a leading cause of death, second only to accidents.

And when it comes to youth struggling with suicide attempts, suicidal ideation and mental health, many studies, statistics and experts seem to be pointing to growing concern and an increase in youth needing help.

Feeling more needed to be done after losing their friend, Zak and Zane started working to create a "safe online space" for youth.

Now, through their mentalhealthcobourg Instagram account, the pair hosts weekly live streams encouraging youth to speak up if they're struggling. They also share resources and tips.

At the start of March, they had more than 1,000 followers.

"There's been a lot of support and that is driving us to keep going," said Zak. "This has honestly given me so much hope."

Experts suggest a suicidal person is feeling so much pain, they see no other option but death as an escape from overwhelming pain and anguish, the Canadian Mental Health Association reports.

For their weekly streams, Zak and Zane try to zero in on certain issues, but say they also encourage others to drive conversations.

People know best what

SPECIAL INVESTIGATION:
TEEN SUICIDE - THE PREVALENCE AND CHALLENGES OF THE ISSUE ARE ADDRESSED, AS WELL AS RESOURCES FOR THOSE STRUGGLING WITH THE ISSUE.

they're needing to talk about - and that's what it's about and providing support, said the pair.

By speaking up, the boys hope this will help "reduce the stigma" and encourage youth to seek help when they need it. What's more, because they are youth, they hope other kids might be more willing to listen and accept what they're saying.

And so far, they've been successful with getting youth engaged and talking, they say.

"This has really made us think about how kids helping kids might be more impactful at times," said Zane. "Adults can certainly empower us and do, but no one better understands youth than their peers because we're living through this with them."

Already this year, the boys attended a suicide prevention workshop and consulted on a new youth walk-in counselling clinic. They've also met with mental health professionals within Northumberland, all with the goal of becoming better informed so they can help their peers and increase awareness.

"The fact that we're trying to help and that's been so well received, that means everything," said Zane.

The boys' efforts in recent months have also unexpectedly benefited them.

"I find myself taking my own advice a little more and this has helped me with my confidence," said Zak.

For Zane, he says he's "a little more open" when talking with others. Both say their efforts have



Illustration by Cindy Taylor/Northumberland News

Between 2016 and 2017, one-in-seven students in the Ontario Student Drug and Health Survey indicated they had 'serious thoughts about suicide'.

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helped with "self-reflection."

Coroner data compiled by the Toronto Star and Ryerson School of Journalism last year revealed that more than 5,800 kids and youth have died by suicide in the last 13 years.

In 2016 alone, the data indicated 181 Ontarians between ages eight and 24 died by suicide (Note for readers: Several institutes collecting youth suicide data include people into their 20s and sometimes people into their 30s).

In 2011, Statistics Canada reported 140 deaths due to intentional self-harm for boys and 58 deaths for girls ages 15 to 19. There

were 12 and 17 deaths among boys and girls 10 to 14 years old, respectively. Two years before that, 202 youth aged 15 to 19 died by suicide.

It's also widely believed suicide deaths are under-reported.

"I had my first mental health episode and started struggling with mental health in the summer of 92 - I was 20 years old," says Brandon Hahn, a Cobourg resident and mental health advocate. Reflecting on his 20s, "I didn't feel I had a place in this world."

Hahn started to struggle with mental health after high school and as he was heading to university.

Eventually, he became "very withdrawn and suicidal."

Over the years, he says there were a few scary instances. Looking back, "I'm very lucky to still be here."

"Just after my 32nd birthday, the same thing happened - actually it got worse, and I tried suicide."

It wasn't right away, but this later became Hahn's "turning point." He's since tried to "live life the best he can" and has dedicated his time as a mental health advocate.

Today, when he thinks about what kids are dealing with, it's concerning, he says, in particular with respect to social media. With a click of a button, "kids tell other kids to go kill themselves."

When kids are getting to the point they feel they can't be a part of this world

and are prepared to act on that, there needs to be adult intervention, he said. There needs to be more work to stop it from getting to this point, where kids are considering suicide as a viable escape, he said.

Just in recent years, Hahn knows of at least two youth lost to suicide in his community.

In an effort to address a rising number of Northumberland youth needing mental health supports, last week it was announced a new walk-in counselling option for youth would launch March 19.

The new service is an expansion of an existing adult mental health walk-in clinic, thanks to a partnership between Northumberland Hills Hospital's

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'PEOPLE DO CARE AND WE WILL STEP UP AND HELP,' SAYS TEEN

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Community Mental Health Service, the Northumberland Community Counselling Centre (NCCC), and Rebound Child and Youth Services.

During the announcement, Carol Beauchamp, executive director of Rebound Child and Youth Services, highlighted data from the Mental Health Commission of Canada, which indicates one-in-five experience a mental health issue in any given year. Additionally, 70 per cent say symptoms started in childhood.

Research also shows suicides are frequently related to an underlying mental health issue.

At the announcement, Beauchamp spoke briefly to a steady increasing need among youth and growing waitlists for supports. She said Rebound is currently serving about 870 youth through mental health services, in comparison to 465 youth in 2013-14.

The walk-in clinic is meant to offer "immediate assistance."

According to the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health's (CAMH) latest Ontario Student Drug Use and Health Survey (OSDUHS) conducted between November 2016 and June 2017, one-in-seven students said they had "serious thoughts about suicide."

Four per cent or an estimated 33,400 students reported a suicide attempt in the same time frame.

The OSDUHS has been conducted every two years since 1977, CAMH reports. The survey focuses on grades seven to 12 and included 764 classes in 214 schools in 2017.

Another survey of 1,319 Canadian teens between ages 13 and 18 by Kids Help Phone in 2016 found about one-in-five had "seriously considered suicide."

Youth are contending with a lot today, says Jennifer Cox, the Northumberland hospital's integrated community mental health director. They have a lot of dramatic changes happening, including bio-



Jennifer Cox, the integrated community mental health director with Northumberland Hills Hospital, says both the hospital and community mental health offices have seen a steady increase in the number of youth needing mental health supports.

Sarah Hyatt/Northumberland News

logical and emotional, then there are the big life choices like schooling also adding pressure, she says.

Cox encourages people to think about when they get physically rundown, "then you pick up a cold or a bug." It's not so different with mental health, she says.

The way people are living has also changed drastically due to technology and that's believed to be having an impact, she said.

Her team deals with about 33,000 mental health visits in a year (this figure includes all ages).

In 2017 and 2018, of all youth mental health visits, almost half were for youth in crisis.

Technology today means people have a lot of choices and that can be good, but it can also be overwhelming, said Cox. With the advances in tech-

nology, it also means parents might not always feel they have the experience to help kids because the climate has shifted so dramatically, she said.

Before her current role, Cox worked in the hospital emergency department (ED) helping people in crisis.

It was not uncommon to see youth and families turning to the ED for help, she said.

The Northumberland hospital reports the total number of youth in the ED for mental health reasons has increased year-over-year since 2014-15. The hospital's mental health crisis visits involving youth have also "increased significantly," from 16 per cent of the total crisis visits in 2014-15, to 26 per cent in 2018-19.

And Cox was quick to note this isn't the only

measure of youth in crisis.

Children's Mental Health Ontario (CMHO) says since 2006-07 there's been a 63 per cent increase in ED visits and a 67 per cent increase in hospitalizations for kids and youth with mental health issues.

In just 2013-14, Canadian Institute for Health Information (CIHI) data shows nearly 2,500 youth were hospitalized due to intentional self-harm.

In 2017, CMHO also commissioned a survey on children and youth mental health.

Among key findings reported were one-third of parents who said they sought help for kids, but of those who did, four-in-10 didn't get the help needed or are still waiting.

Four-in-10 youth said they sought out supports, but nearly half couldn't get help they needed, and then

half found getting help challenging.

Navigating the system can be hard and that onus really shouldn't be on people, said Cox. This is sometimes why people end up at hospitals, because they don't know where to go, she said.

Then there's also stigma, "which is still very much alive."

And because of this, people can end up so overwhelmed, they too, end up in hospital, she said.

If someone has a sore throat, and there have been surveys on this, most people will only let that go so long, said Cox. But when it comes to depression or anxiety, they might hope it will go away, they might pretend those symptoms aren't really there, or they'll try to manage it on their own, all because of stigma, said Cox.



In other words, mental health professionals say they don't often see people when they're first experiencing symptoms, despite this being the most effective time for intervention.

But there has also been a lot of work to reduce stigma and with increased awareness, in particular with youth, it's believed more are seeking help as a result, said Cox.

In Northumberland, Cox hopes the youth walk-in option will provide some relief.

The adult walk-in service is said to have had good success.

Goals of the service have been exceeded; wait times for care decreased and access to treatment increased, said Cox.

As for Zak and Zane, they know it's hard to visibly see noticeable change, but they're going to push forward.

And they will not forget their friend.

"This really is in his name," said Zak, adding when they're doing live streams, it's like their friend is with them.

For youth out there struggling, the boys say, "You are not alone."

Their live streams are Mondays at 9:30 p.m.

"People do care and we will step up and help," said Zane. "The strongest person can be vulnerable and can need help - and we can't face everything alone."

Next week, part two will focus on one person's struggle with her mental health and how she uses her experience to help others.

STORY BEHIND THE STORY

Mental health impacts us all, especially young people and with 10 Canadians dying each day by suicide the issue merited an investigation.