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Mental Health, Moving Forward on the Issue

Discussion Note

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A number of recent high profile cases of teen suicide have led to much public debate about the growing problem of teen bullying, suicide and mental health problems. Parents and children have come forward and talked publicly about their personal stories and tragedies. There have been town hall meetings, panel discussions and information sessions. The issues have been covered in the media, on TV, radio and in the press, there have been awareness raising campaigns, and the issues are being raised and discussed in schools and classrooms. The City of Ottawa has proclaimed a suicide prevention day and is implementing a three-year mental health promotion and suicide prevention strategy for children and youth. The issues have also been raised in Parliament, calling on the Federal Government to develop a national mental health and an anti-bullying and suicide prevention strategy.

Unfortunately however there has been no progress, no step forward dealing with mental health problems where they are experienced and where they take place, in individual minds, in our inner mental life. The young are telling us about the causes of their problems, being unable to cope and deal in their mind with the demands and challenges of existence in a fast changing world. In the end, those committing suicide make clear choices and decisions, to take the only way they see open to them dealing with persisting and growing mental problems, by ending their own life.

Instead of dealing with the problems where they are experienced and take place, we are creating a culture of victims. We foster a view of being mentally fragile and helpless victims of external forces and conditions and internal ailments, mental illness, psychological disorders and syndromes, and neurological, biochemical and genetic factors. We reduce the mind to the brain, and our inner mental life and the acting mental self to neurological and biochemical structures and processes. We reduce mental

problems, difficulties understanding and managing the mind, the inner mental life and the mental self, to mental illness, psychological disorders and syndromes, and neurological or biochemical factors. We fail to differentiate between mental problems (difficulties understanding and managing the mind, our inner mental life and the mental self), mental disorders (the consequences in the mind of neurological and biochemical problems of the brain), and neurological and biochemical problems themselves. We are creating images of ourselves of being unable to deal with the demands and challenges, problems and difficulties of existence, particularly of the mind, our inner mental life and the mental self, without the help of trained experts and specialists.

What is missing and what is being lost is understanding and dealing with our inner mental life and the mental self, which we individually are aware of and which we experience, which we must understand, manage and deal with. We ignore the root-causes and developments behind mental health problems, bullying and suicide, that is, failing to understand and manage the mind, our inner mental life and the mental self. We ignore the demands and challenges, problems and difficulties of understanding and managing what takes place, what we do and what we need to do, what we must individually establish, develop and maintain in the mind and our inner mental life. Instead, we reduce mental health problems, such as depression and resulting suicide, not to mention substance abuse and addiction, to environmental factors and internal ailments, mental illness, psychological disorders and syndromes, and neurological and biochemical problems in the brain.

Bullying is not a cause. Bullying, like suicide, is a symptom and consequence of underlying causes and developments. It is an expression of a troubled mind, in the same way as is taking one's own life. They are indicators of difficulties dealing in the mind with the conditions, demands and challenges of existence in a fast changing world. Difficulties dealing in the mind with dramatic socio-cultural developments and changes, and problematic results and consequences, which we face and we have to deal with.

Briefly, the socio-cultural developments and changes we face today are the decline of traditional external structures of order and stability, certainty and security, the close-knit family, community and society. They include the decline of shared beliefs, views, values and conventions. The mental faculties, mental skills and practices that were taught by family, community and society are no longer developed in the young. On the other hand, we fail to develop the knowledge, understanding and the mental faculties to understand and manage existence and development without the external structures of order and stability. We do not teach the young the knowledge, understanding and the mental faculties to establish and maintain the necessary internal mental conditions – a sense of self, mental order and stability, clarity of mind and understanding, a sense of certainty, security and confidence, to deal in the mind with the conditions, demands and challenges of a changing world.

We cannot control external conditions and developments, or create the ideal external conditions that do not make demands and do not challenge our inner mental life and the mental self beyond what we are prepared to deal with. We need to establish the necessary

internal mental conditions, develop the knowledge, understanding and the mental faculties to deal in the mind with the conditions, demands and challenges of existence and the world around us in constructive ways. Creating a different culture and a better world requires changing how we understand and manage existence and development, starting with the mind, our inner mental life and the mental self.

The young are unfamiliar with their mind, their inner mental life and the mental self. They are not able to find their way around in them. They do not know how to understand and deal with what is taking place in the mind. More importantly, they do not know or understand their own role and responsibility in their mental life, what they need to do and what they must establish, develop and maintain in the mind. They are unable to deal in the mind in constructive ways with the conditions, demands and challenges of existence in a dramatically changing world. The young lack the knowledge, the understanding and the mental faculties to deal in their mind with disorder and instability, doubt, confusion, uncertainty and insecurity.

We deprive the young, we are not providing them with the knowledge, understanding and mental faculties they require to deal in their mind with the changing conditions, demands and challenges of existence and the world around them in constructive and beneficial ways, and not be overwhelmed by them, becoming perpetrators and victims of bullying. We fail to provide the education and training in mental development and growth that are required to understand and manage the mind as the place where we consciously exist and act, where our inner mental life takes place, and where we must deal with the mental self. The place where we experience, become aware, and where we must consider the conditions of existence and the world around us, and how to deal with them. Understanding and managing the mind as the place where by nature we are individually in charge and in control, where we must actively be engaged, take charge, be in control, and take responsibility for the individual self, for what we do and we engage in, individual behaviour and action.

We assume traditional education and training, socialization into established socio-cultural beliefs, views, values and conventions, knowledge and understanding are sufficient to deal with all aspects and elements of human existence and development, particularly the mind, our inner mental life and the mental self in a changing world. The evidence seems to indicate it is no longer sufficient.

We tell the young to trust us, and it is what is getting them into trouble. We are not honest and open with them or with ourselves, about our own mind and inner mental life, the problems and difficulties we have dealing with them and the mental self. We pretend we have risen above them, we no longer have to struggle with mental problems and difficulties, demands and challenges, our inner mental life and the mental self. We pretend and project an image of having to struggle only with issues beyond ourselves, with larger social, political, economic and professional demands and challenges, in our jobs, careers and tasks. We pretend we are in charge and in control in our mind, our inner mental life and the mental self, we know what we do, how to manage and conduct ourselves, and take responsibility for ourselves.

We tell the young, to understand and deal with their mind, the inner mental life and the mental self they need the help of trained experts and specialists. However, the evidence seems to indicate the experts and specialists are not able to help those in need of help to deal with their mind and mental existence. They seem to operate largely in the dark when it comes to dealing with the mind and mental problems, difficulties understanding and managing our inner mental life and the mental self. There have been many cases of young people taking their life who were already in treatment for mental health problems, receiving care from experts and specialists, doctors and counselors, which clearly were not able to help them. There are also many cases where those in treatment become disillusioned and frustrated with the treatment, because it is not helping them, and they stop treatment altogether. Such cases are usually viewed as having fallen through the cracks, or being the consequences of a lack of necessary resources. They are not considered as an indication of the limits of expert knowledge, understanding and treatment, when it comes to dealing with the mind, our inner mental life and the mental self, problems and difficulties understanding and managing them.

Years and decades of research and study in the sciences of the mind have not brought about any significant results dealing with mental health problems. It has not led to a decline in mental health problems, or reducing resulting substance abuse, addiction and suicide. On the contrary, today we are facing a looming mental health crisis of persisting and growing mental health problems, substance abuse, addiction and suicide around the world. In Ottawa alone, it has been reported, 50 people a year die by taking their own life, and for every suicide about 20 attempts are made, particularly by young people.

We need to face reality and deal with the real problem of bullying, suicide and mental health problems. We must address the root-causes and developments that lie behind them. We need to deal with the issues at a more fundamental level, in more substantial ways. We must go below the surface, and beyond short-term measures dealing only with symptoms and consequences after the fact, and deal with the root-causes and underlying developments.

We need to prevent mental health problems from developing, dealing with the demands and challenges of the mind, our inner mental life and the mental self before they develop into larger mental problems, not waiting until they have developed, leading to bullying and suicide, before dealing with them. What is required is education and training in mental development and growth, demystifying the mind, our inner mental life and the mental self, our role and responsibility in them, how to manage and deal with them, as well as understanding the results and consequences of failing to understand and manage the mind and mental existence. Education and training in mental development and growth not only for those dealing with mental health problems, youth-at-risk, but also for mental health care practitioners, parents, teachers and adults.

We are failing the young, future generations, and we are failing ourselves dealing with mental health problems. We fail the young by not providing them with the knowledge, understanding and the mental faculties to understand and manage their mind and mental

existence, their inner mental life and the mental self, to be in charge, in control and to be actively engaged where they consciously exist and act, taking responsibility for themselves, for what they do and they engage in, their individual behaviour and action.

Teens who take their own life, and those considering and attempting it are the proverbial canaries in the mine. And they are only the tip of the ice berg, of problems developing under the surface. They are telling us, in their way, they do not want to live in the world we construct. They warn and alert us, there is something problematic about the world we construct, the way we understand and manage existence and development, particularly how we understand and deal with the mind, our inner mental life and the mental self. Teenage bullying and suicide are a call for action, action to address the deeper-rooted causes and deal with underlying developments, going beyond instant relief dealing only with symptoms and consequences.

We need to immunize the young, metaphorically speaking, against mental health problems through education and training in mental development and growth. Developing in the young the knowledge, understanding and the mental faculties to understand and manage the mind, the inner mental life and the mental self – nature, elements and processes, conditions, needs, demands and challenges, our role and responsibility in them, how to manage and deal with them. To understand and manage what takes place, what we do and what we need to do, what individually we must establish, develop and maintain in the mind. Establishing and maintaining the necessary internal mental conditions – a sense of the human and the mental self, mental order and stability, clarity of mind and understanding, a sense of certainty, security and confidence, in everything we do and we engage in, preventing mental problems from developing. Dealing in the mind with the demands and challenges, change and changing conditions of existence and the world around us when only a minimum in mental work, effort and adjustment are required, before they develop into larger problems, difficulties and crises in the mind, which we can no longer deal with alone. Developing the mental faculties, the natural mental powers and abilities, translating them into the necessary mental skills and practices, and engaging in the required mental work and effort. Engaging in a process of continuous, life-long mental self-development and growth, preventing external influences, such as bullying for example, from leading to negative emotional experiences, depression, the loss of self-confidence, and ultimately suicide.

Failing to provide education and training in mental development and growth we condemn the young and future generations to be victims. We condemn them to a life of persisting and growing mental disorder and instability, doubt, confusion, uncertainty and insecurity, feelings of fear, stress, anxiety, frustration, helplessness and depression, without the means to deal with them, leading to persisting and growing mental health problems, resulting in bullying, substance abuse, addiction and suicide.