

Early response to mental illness is best

Editor's note: In response to the number of mental health-related issues that Squamish RCMP have handled in the past few weeks, Christine Buttus, Sea to Sky coordinator for the North Shore Schizophrenia Society (NSSS), submitted the following article aimed at helping citizens better understand mental health issues and the resources available in the community.

In most cases, signs and symptoms of mental illness appear well before a crisis requiring a 911 call or acute-care intervention.

Seldom, if ever, will a person lose control of thoughts, feelings and behaviour all of a sudden.

Signs leading up to a crisis may include sleeplessness, inexplicable changes in functioning, social isolation, problems at work or in relationships, rapid decline in school work, vague signs of depression, anxiety, difficulty coping with stress, odd thoughts or behaviour, ritualistic preoccupation with certain activities, paranoia or unpredictable outbursts.

Some families delay asking for help for a variety of reasons. They may hope their loved one isn't ill or they lack knowledge about mental illness. Once we can get past those barriers, families can move on to helping their ill family member.

Those who receive early treatment almost always

have better outcomes. It is better and kinder to the person with the illness to obtain treatment and support services as early as possible.

The B.C. Mental Health Act provides for a proactive response when a person is at risk of substantial mental or physical deterioration.

For those with an illness who are having real difficulty, hospitalization may be required, which in turn may require involuntary admission, since people with severe mental illness often do not understand they are ill.

Families need to ensure their general practitioner understands the provision for involuntary admission in the Mental Health Act and is willing to use it. Any doctor can issue a first certificate to have a patient he/she believes is in need of acute care admitted to hospital for further evaluation.

Family members or others with concerns should contact the support coordinator at the Family Support Centre, operated by the North Shore Schizophrenia Society (NSSS) but covering all serious mental illness.

The centre can provide background information, help determine if there is a reason for concern and outline appropriate steps to take. For those with an illness, a connection to Mental Health Services is important.

Friends, neighbours, employers, landlords and service providers are also

welcome to call NSSS for information and advice if they are worried about someone.

We work with people wherever they are, often family members in other provinces and sometimes other countries.

People with a mental disorder are at increased risk of suicide.

Up to 90 per cent of people who die by suicide have a diagnosed mental disorder such as depression, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, or an addiction. Appropriate treatment for these disorders lowers the risk of suicide, so it is essential that people with symptoms have access to treatment as quickly as possible.

Help is available in Squamish.

Families coping with serious mental illness of any kind should call the Family Support Centre at (604) 926-0856 for personal support, education, and other programs. For the support group in Squamish, call (604) 898-9372.

Information on all serious mental illness, Family Support Centre programs, and other resources is available at www.northshoreschizophrenia.org.

VCH Squamish Mental Health and Addiction Services can be reached at (604) 892-6365. Child and Youth Mental Health can be reached at (604) 892-1400.

For immediate assistance for those who are thinking

of hurting themselves, or are concerned about someone who may be in distress, call the 24-hour Crisis Centre Distress Line at 1-866-661-3311 or 1-800-784-2433 (Suicide). NSSS provides support and education services for families caring for anyone with a serious mental illness.

For more information about programs, services and upcoming events, please contact Christine at christine@northshoreschizophrenia.org, (604) 932-7543 or (604) 849-2252, or visit the NSSS website at www.northshoreschizophrenia.org.