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Mental Health Support Network Provides Information to Deal with Stress of SARS

Members of the Mental Health Support Network of Canada are:

Canadian Association of Social Workers

Canadian Healthcare Association

Canadian Medical Association

Canadian Mental Health Association

Canadian Nurses Association

Canadian Paediatric Society

Canadian Pharmacists Association

Canadian Psychiatric Association

Canadian Psychological Association

Canadian Public Health Association

College of Family Physicians of Canada

Canadian Red Cross

Ottawa, April 7, 2003 – With concerns growing over the spread of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), the Mental Health Support Network of Canada (MHSNC) has developed information sheets for both the public and health care providers to help deal with the stress and anxiety associated with the recent outbreak.

The fact sheet for the general public gives Canadians information to help them identify increasing stress in themselves or their family members. Simple advice is given on how to talk about SARS with children and where to go if the stress becomes too much to handle. The health care providers fact sheet recognizes that health care workers are also feeling anxiety and stress. It details signs and symptoms of increasing stress and anxiety and offers advice on what to do.

“The spread of the disease, the unknown cause and the precautions being taken to protect the health of the public, patients and professionals can be scary and disrupting,” said Canadian Medical Association President, Dr. Dana Hanson. *“SARS is of great concern but the vast majority of us are not in danger. Based on what we know at this time, the best thing most of us can do for ourselves and our families is to carry on with our normal daily routine.”*

While being informed through a balanced selection of sources about SARS is important, the MHSNC advises against spending too much time listening to programmes or reading about SARS if it’s upsetting to you. Much like September 11 and the war in Iraq, it’s important to limit the amount of exposure you and your family have to these events.

“Talking about your thoughts and feelings with family and friends can help everyone feel less stressed,” noted Dr. John Service, Executive Director of the Canadian Psychological Association. *“SARS can be particularly upsetting to children and teenagers. It is important to discuss these issues with them. Don’t be afraid to bring up the subject. You may need to discuss it more than once.”*

The MHSNC suggests that if you notice a loved one, friend, colleague or co-worker’s behaviour has changed, ask them how they are doing. It shows you care and it can be a relief to both of you. In fact, check in even if their behaviour has not changed. *“If you or someone that you know is experiencing symptoms of stress over a period of time, such as a week or two, you should consider seeking out a health professional,”* added Dr. Blake Woodside, President of the Canadian Psychiatric Association. *“A professional will explain your reactions and help you find ways to better deal with the situation.”*

People may feel more anxious about SARS because of their feelings about the war in Iraq. One situation can make the other one more difficult to handle. This is not unusual. *“People who have recently experienced a sad or traumatic event may find SARS and/or the war in Iraq more upsetting,”* said Don Shropshire, Director, Disaster Services, Canadian Red Cross. *“It’s normal to feel more stressed under these conditions.”*

The Mental Health Support Network of Canada believes that it is important for Canadians to be aware that it is normal to experience a range of emotional reactions to the SARS outbreak. In order to help Canadians to help themselves, it is critical for the professional health community to provide clear, concise and consistent information to all Canadians.

The member organizations of the MHSNC are working together to provide clear information tools to help Canadians cope with the reactions they may be experiencing due to SARS and other destabilizing occurrences. The SARS information sheets can be obtain through the www.cma.ca and the websites of the MHSNC members.

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