



## Unique partnership brings mental health education to the community

Hamilton Health Sciences (HHS) staff are reaching into the community to help frontline workers support youth with mental health issues. This fall at HHS [Ron Joyce Children's Health Centre](#), Marlene Traficante and Dr. Paulo Pires will offer their fourth workshop on youth mental health, geared specifically for frontline community service staff.

## Mental health education for frontline community workers

The workshop began last year with a simple connection. Irene Heffernan, senior project manager with City of Hamilton's

[Xperience Annex](#), was working with a number of organizations across Hamilton that deliver services to youth. Many of their clients are vulnerable and don't have a strong support system. Many of them also have mental health challenges, including depression, [anxiety](#) and related [substance abuse](#). Frontline staff in these organizations are well equipped to help youth navigate social services, but they don't always have the knowledge and tools to support them in a mental health crisis. When HHS's director of Interprofessional development, [John Parker](#), joined Xperience Annex's Youth Steering Committee, he saw an opportunity to help. He connected Irene with HHS staff who specialize in youth mental health, and she saw a perfect opportunity to transfer their knowledge.

Dr. Pires, a psychologist, and Marlene, a social worker, have been working in youth mental health for 16 years and 24 years, respectively. The pair knows how far basic knowledge about mental health can go in supporting youth in crisis. With Irene's input, they developed a teaching plan to deliver a workshop that would provide frontline youth community workers with tools they may need to help their clients.

Being able to respond appropriately when a youth comes to you with a problem can make a big difference for them, says Marlene. We aren't teaching people how to be therapists, but we're giving them a greater understanding of mental health issues so they can act as a support when needed.

## **The tools to make a difference**

The workshop covers a wide range of topics including factors that can contribute to mental health issues, signs of anxiety, low mood, and suicide risk, and strategies for coaching clients through difficult emotions.

When you can identify mental health issues and validate the experience of the youth, you start an important conversation, Marlene adds. Youth won't always want to accept help, but

when they feel validated, they will be more open to it. We teach frontline workers how to validate their clients emotions, which can lead to a conversation about how to solve the underlying problems.

*that is evidence of how great the need for this education is*

For workshop attendees, learning how to start that conversation has been a game changer.

People who have attended this workshop have told us that learning to validate and then ask the client to take action has been really effective, says Irene.

Julia Verbitsky, an intensive community case manager with Wesley Urban Ministries who completed the workshop, says it emphasized many important themes. As an added bonus, it helped her to connect with other organizations. There was an opportunity for agencies and teams to learn from each other's programs, stimulating relationships and potential partnerships within our city to best serve youth in Hamilton.

The sessions were originally half-day, but have been extended to full-day so attendees can gain more knowledge. The fall session booked up within days of being promoted, and Irene has a waiting list for future sessions.

I think that is evidence of how great the need for this education is, she says. Mental health is an issue for so many of the young people we work with, and being able to equip workers across our city to support them is really important.

---

The workshops, called Understanding and Working with Youth who have Mental Health Problems, is free to attend for anyone who works directly with youth in Hamilton. It takes place twice a year at Ron Joyce Children's Health Centre. For more

information, contact: Irene Heffernan at 905-546-2424 ext:  
4929.