OMHF award helps PhD student continue research into emotional health of adolescents

2014-06-17

Photo by Eric Brousseau

"Using well-timed prevention programs, we can teach teens to manage their emotions in healthier ways, and in turn reduce the rates of depression and anxiety," says Clinical Psychology PhD candidate Dianna Lanteigne.

Dianna has been awarded with one of nine Ontario Mental Health Foundation (OMHF) Research Studentships for graduate students across the province for 2014-2015. The award will help with the financial burden of tuition and living expenses while Dianna completes her ongoing research projects and finishes her advanced training in mental health care. The award will last for 1 year – the last year of Dianna’s PhD before her internship. Dianna was chosen for the award based on the relevance of her research to the mental health of youth in Ontario, her research plan which is based on strong theoretical and empirical foundations, and her history of academic excellence.

Dianna’s research program involves a number of studies investigating how different strategies to manage emotions change across early adolescence to emerging adulthood. For example, as stressful events happen in teens’ lives they can manage their emotions in a variety of ways such as purposely changing the way they are thinking to make themselves feel better, or holding back their expressions of emotion. Depending on the context, some strategies can be helpful or harmful for mental health.

“During adolescence, at least one out of five individuals will develop symptoms of depression or anxiety and these symptoms often escalate or persist throughout adulthood,” Dianna explains. “The way that people approach and manage their emotions on a daily basis is one of the key factors underlying overall wellbeing and different forms of mental illness, especially disorders like depression and anxiety.”

Dianna believes that the way teens approach and manage their emotions can change through well-timed prevention and treatment efforts, which will in turn, decrease rates of depression and anxiety. For
example, the FRIENDS program by Paula Barrett teaches social and emotional skills and has strong research results suggesting effective prevention of anxious symptoms. Along with her advisor, Dr. Tom Hollenstein, and colleagues in the Adolescent Dynamics Lab at Queen’s Psychology, Dianna will be involved in testing the use of similar programs for older students specifically during stressful transitions like changing schools, and the use of programs teaching socioemotional skills using computer-based methods like the Mindlight video game for anxiety (The Play Nice Institute). The goal of these studies is to apply what is known about emotion regulation to enhance positive regulation in youth and measure the results.

When her studies are complete the results will be submitted for publication in academic journals such as Developmental Psychology and The Journal of Research on Adolescence, and presented at international conferences such as The Society for Research in Child Development Biennial Meeting. The results will also be disseminated to educators and clinicians through local conferences and hopefully used to inform mental health policies in Ontario.

Dianna’s clinical and research training has allowed her to develop strong relationships with mental health care providers in both school and hospital settings. She believes that ongoing research projects in these settings allow for quick and effective informal communication between research at Queen’s and front line mental health care workers. Formal communication occurs with summary reports and presentations for staff and the community upon completion of projects.

“It can be difficult for adolescents to obtain treatment due to many factors such as lack of awareness, stigma, financial barriers, and shortage of mental health professionals,” Dianna says. “It is my hope that evidence-based strategies can be disseminated more broadly, and that we use current technologies such as video games and apps to enhance traditional depression and anxiety prevention and treatment programs.”