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Population Child & Youth Health

24th June 2016

Mental health and behavior issues are common among young people in New Zealand and New Zealand does not have a good track record in supporting and helping youth experiencing distress and challenges. The Youth2000 national youth health survey has documented that one in eight secondary school students have significant symptoms of depression, one quarter have deliberately harmed themselves and one student in 20 has tried to commit suicide. Furthermore, significant numbers of young people engage in cigarette smoking, binge drinking and other risk behaviours that threaten their health and wellbeing. The scale and proportion of young people who have mental health concerns or behaviour issues, means that specialist mental health services are increasingly overwhelmed and intervention programmes based in the community are urgently needed.

Therapeutic Story Intervention is exciting intervention that shows enormous potential in being able to address some of these challenges. Therapeutic Story Intervention is based on the book 'Gem of the First Water' that Ron Phillips developed over 30 years ago. TSI aims to teach teenagers important life skills and improve their understanding around their own mental wellbeing, decision making and life choices. The strength of TSI, over more traditional psychotherapeutic approaches, is in its ability to engage adolescents through the power of story-telling. Through the storytelling of 'Gem of the First Water', teenagers learn consequences of poor impulse control, make connections between their feelings and behaviours, and learn how to deal with grief, and drugs and alcohol issues. TSI has been used extensively in South Auckland as well as elsewhere and results are impressive. An early evaluation of TSI in a south Auckland specialist mental health service for young people showed engagement rates of over 60%, compared to traditional rates of below 50%.

The University of Auckland is planning a rigorous trial of TSI, using cluster randomised design with robust measures of mental health to show the effectiveness of TSI among school

students in South Auckland. This trial will randomly select classrooms to participate in TSI from participating South Auckland schools and evaluate the mental health and wellbeing of students over a six-month period compared to students from control classrooms. If successful, this trial will point the way for future programs to engage, support and teach young people how to look after themselves, make the right choices and understand their own mental health, so that they can remain well, vibrant and engaged in their families and communities.

Dr Simon Denny

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