

College of Psychiatrists of Ireland mark MHW 2013:

Opinion Piece  
**Worth getting worked up about?**

**What is happening with young men's mental health?**  
Dr Paddy Power, Consultant Psychiatrist

What has us so worked up about the state of mental health of our young men? Is it the media angst about the spate of youth suicides, the casualties of drink and drugs, the painful cases of abuse, the spectre of emigration? Are these a barometer of festering ills in our society that breed a generation of ill health or have problems always been there and we just haven't bothered to acknowledge them before?

What are the mental challenges young men face as they move from adolescence into adulthood? These days, young men are encouraged to believe that anything is possible. It's a period of individual discovery, experimentation, independence, identity, carving out a place in society, and finding a partner. However, it's also a time of emotional setbacks, realisation, limitations, failures, rejections, doubts and struggles, particularly in coming to terms with oneself. It doesn't help when young men are at the mercy of their emotions and when dreams can be so painfully shattered.

If this period is a struggle for young men it's equally an anxious period for their parents. Will their two decades of emotional investment pay off? Or will any difficulties experienced during childhood now come home to roost? Sadly when sons do experience emotional problems, they often hide them and parents can be oblivious to their extent until they have reached a life threatening crisis.

Thankfully, most young men make it through this transition relatively unscathed but there is sadly a minority who come to grief, whether it's dropping out of college, getting into drugs, unemployment, criminality, unstable relationships, or homelessness. It's important not to assume that this is always psychiatric as these emotional difficulties might be a very understandable reaction to life's adversities. Sure, these young men may be at greater risk of mental illness and might sometimes benefit from counselling but to label all of them as 'ill' certainly won't help any sense of alienation they might already be feeling.

What is remarkable is how most young people recover from these emotional challenges and traumas often under their own steam and with little or no help. In many ways it's a normal part of growing up. However, for about 15% of adults, the late teens and early adult years are when they first experience mental ill-health -75% of mental illnesses develop before the age of 25. For those who have these experiences, it can be a very dark, lonely and disturbing time. Thankfully, for the majority recovery is the norm and the episode is a temporary blip in an otherwise healthy life. But for a minority it may be the beginning of a lifetime of further episodes, repeated hospitalisations and complicating disability. What seems to differentiate these outcomes is whether young people seek help early and long enough to ensure a full recovery and prevent relapse. Even with all the

public health education these days about mental illness it is still surprising how long people endure their symptoms before they finally seek professional help. It's 6-8 years on average for people who experience depression and longer for people with anxiety conditions. By then the damage is often done, it's more difficult to reverse, and the treatment may need to be more complicated.

Unfortunately accessing mental health services quickly is not easy and most services these days have long waitlists. Nor are most particularly youth friendly. Teenagers face the added problem of a split between adolescent and adult services - unfortunately many fall between the gaps. However, even though there are major shortcomings in existing services the message is beginning to get through that young people need a better deal. Youth mental health is receiving greater attention and a small number of youth mental health services have been established already in Ireland. We've got several excellent local on line services e.g. [ie.reachout.com](http://ie.reachout.com) and [spunout.ie](http://spunout.ie) with very helpful advice for young people and parents. Irish groups are at the forefront internationally in promoting these new developments. They've facilitated the creation and launched the International Declaration on Youth Mental Health. Several youth mental health conferences have been held locally. Irish groups such as Headstrong, Inspire, SIG (ACAMH), SpunOut and the College of Psychiatrists of Ireland have been very active in promoting youth mental health (Youth Mental Health is the college's theme for 2013). Campaigns such as *Darkness Into Light* and *Walk in My Shoes* have become national annual charity fixtures. Dublin is about to host a major European conference (ESCAP) in July on child and adolescent mental health. Later this year, the International Association of Youth Mental Health (IAYMH) is holding its conference in Brighton, in October, bringing together young people, their families, professionals, clinicians, academics and policy makers to exchange ideas, collaborate and establish common goals. While these meetings might seem far removed from the coalface they are an absolutely essential vehicle for promoting change and combining efforts.

While the mental health scene might still seem grim in Ireland for young men there is a gathering impetus and acknowledgment that it's high time that mental health services improve and no longer will we as a nation that tolerates the scandals, the misery, and the waste of so many young lives. This is something definitely worth getting worked up about.

**Dr Paddy Power is a Consultant Child & Adolescent, Adult Psychiatrist & Honorary Senior Lecturer, Young Adult Service, St Patrick's University Hospital, James Street, Dublin 8 and a member of the College of Psychiatrists of Ireland.**

***Note to editor: The College of Psychiatrists of Ireland is highlighting Youth Mental Health in 2013 (which covers the age range of 15 to 25). A series of events and activities have and will take place throughout 2013 raising various aspects of youth mental health and illness for college members and the general public. Dr Power's opinion piece focussing on young men's mental health is one of a series of articles being released this week to mark International Men's Health Week (MHW) 2013 and part of College activities for youth mental health.***

*The theme for Men's Health Week 2013 in Ireland is: "Action Men - Turning Words into Actions" (see <http://www.mhfi.org/mhw/mhw-2013.html>.) The purpose of International Men's Health Week is to heighten the awareness of preventable health problems and encourage early detection and treatment of disease and health difficulties among men and boys. MHW always begins on the Monday before Father's Day and ends on Father's Day itself. It is celebrated in most European countries, as well as in the USA, Australia, New Zealand and a number of other places worldwide.*

Ends

Contact:  
Andrea Ryder  
Communications Manager  
External Affairs & Policy

**College of Psychiatrists of Ireland**  
5 Herbert Street, Dublin 2  
Direct Tel: 01 634 4374 / 087 269 7656  
email: [andrea@irishpsychiatry.ie](mailto:andrea@irishpsychiatry.ie)

College Tel: 01- 661 8450 Fax: 01 - 662 9677  
web: [www.irishpsychiatry.ie](http://www.irishpsychiatry.ie)