

**BRIGHT LIGHTS AWARD**

  
2014

**Clinical innovations in comprehensive primary care**  
**McMaster Family Health Team - Adolescent Anxiety Group**

**A safe space for teens at a tough phase of life**



Lynn Dykeman & Alison Bertoia

Life for teenagers is a teeter-totter of new feelings and old fears, increasing responsibilities and a need to push boundaries. It's not an easy time, and Hamilton's McMaster Family Health Team found it was dealing with more and more anxiety among its teenage clients — but anxiety is generally undertreated, and there aren't many mental health programs available for adolescents.

Options for helping this growing group of patients were few; some teens attended anxiety groups with adults, but their issues were very different — and, of course, many of them had to do with adults in the first place. The kids needed peers to talk to.

The solution, clearly, was for the family health team to take on the challenge of helping the teens. The McMaster FHT, which has won the 2014 Association of Family Health Teams of Ontario's Bright Lights Award for clinical innovations in comprehensive primary did just that. Their multidisciplinary mental health team including psychologists, physicians and occupational therapists, and led by social workers, created a teen anxiety program featuring biweekly drop-in sessions at the FHT's Stonechurch clinic.

The initial program was offered to 16 teens aged 14 to 19; attendance ranged between six to 8 kids at a session. The program was structured to run for six sessions, and offered training in mindfulness and cognitive behaviour therapy techniques, to help participants deal with stresses and anxiety as they arose. Weekly handouts helped the teens help themselves.

When the six weeks were up, the teens asked for the group to continue, and began to take on a greater role in shaping it, by suggesting their own topics for discussion. It's also been expanded to focus on developing skills to handle making decisions, peer pressure and family conflict, as well as building relationship skills and self-esteem. Some teens who have been through the program are coming back to act as mentors to newer participants.

Not just teens benefit from the sessions; medical residents and other members of the interprofessional team also attend, to learn more about what anxious teenagers are feeling and facing. And there's lots of gathering of feedback from the participants, during sessions and more formally when they conclude, so leaders can keep refreshing the meetings for new and returning members.

The McMaster Family Health Team plans to expand the program to its other site, and has also developed a presentation to help other primary care providers in the province looking to tackle the widespread problem of teen anxiety.