

Leaving war behind isn't the end of the struggle



GUEST COMMENTARY ALEX LEBLANC

When commenting on newcomer mental health supports in New Brunswick, I must say that it's difficult for me to represent this issue in the truest way, as there are no perspectives truer than those that come from lived experience.

I am a white man, born in New Brunswick, with no experience living through what newcomers do when they immigrate to our province – let alone those newcomers who arrive as refugees. Suffice to say, I spend a lot of my time listening, reading, researching, and listening some more. The

newcomers themselves, along with the dedicated front-line professionals who support them, are the experts. This column is simply a reflection of their experiences.

New Brunswick has welcomed roughly 2,300 newcomers each year for the past five years. This year, our numbers will likely exceed 4,000 by Dec. 31. Each of these individuals has a story about mental health. Each has their own experience – learning our languages and cultures; entering the school system, the workforce and community without a social network; missing home, friends and family; maybe grieving the loss of loved ones; often facing some discrimination and prejudice along the way; and in some cases living in poverty until they are able to gain the skills and experience to move ahead in the workforce. All of these things will test a person's mental health, which – if you think about it – should come as no surprise.

Can you imagine leaving your familiar home and starting a new life in an unfamiliar place? Would you not occasionally feel depressed, insecure,

anxious, and isolated?

A report stemming from research in four communities in Toronto titled *Determinants of Mental Health for Newcomer Youth: Policy and Service Implications* (by Shakya, Khanlou and Goncalves, 2013), notes that settlement related stressors, discrimination, and exclusion are main determinants of mental health for newcomer youth. Settlement stressors include linguistic barriers, barriers entering the labour market, challenges adjusting to the Canadian education system and acculturation challenges (including to Canadian laws, communication patterns, food and customs, cold weather, dating system, etc.).

For instance, similar studies show that many newcomer youth experience difficulty making friends, difficulty understanding their teacher and curriculum, being bullied due to having accents and limited language, and experiencing or witnessing discrimination after coming to Canada, particularly race-based discrimination.

Family support and their collective integration into our communities are

issues that we see so often in the sector, particularly for those who come to Canada as refugees. As the report suggests, both the parents and the children's own wellbeing and integration experience can have important implications on the family's wellbeing as a whole:

"The majority of youth in our study emphasized that the difficulties that their parents face in entering the Canadian labor market not just undermined the income security for their families but also was a key cause of depression, sadness, family tensions and other mental health stresses on their family. Our study reveals that newcomer youth are acutely aware of the labor market challenges that their families face and the resulting socio-economic impacts (de-professionalization, income insecurities) and mental health impacts."

An implicit point here is that newcomers are not necessarily coming from their home country with mental health difficulties. In fact, the immigration process in and of itself will most likely provoke some mental

health stress for them along the way. This is true for a great many newcomers, international students and temporary workers. For others, however, the immigration process may further compound pre-existing stressors or mental health problems, such as may be the case for refugees fleeing violence and traumatic conflict. So, what do we (all of us) do about this?

Whether you are an educator, a public servant, an employer, or an interested neighbour – you can make a difference. You can offer your patience, support and your friendship. You can offer a job, guidance, or assistance finding a job. You can help in big or small ways. But the first thing we all must do is appreciate the sacrifices and hard work of our newcomers. Virtually everything about immigrating is hard work. We must also value their perspectives and contributions. After all, newcomers are giving us a far greater gift – their dreams of a better future.

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