

## Supporting Young Minds:

### Connie Holmlund, RPN is providing mental healthcare, advocacy and outreach for students in rural Manitoba

Every June, Connie Holmlund attends graduation ceremonies at the high schools she serves as a Registered Psychiatric Nurse.

“Watching a student cross that stage to receive their diploma, knowing the challenges they had to overcome to get there, is an amazing feeling,” she says.

At one school, each graduating student descended the stage with a rose, which they gifted to someone in the audience who had made their success possible. One student brought a rose to Connie. The memory still overwhelms her.

“When they feel they’re succeeding,” she says, “I feel I’m doing a good job.”

Connie is a mental health worker for the Sunrise School Division, which serves students from kindergarten to Grade 12 living in a broad swath of eastern Manitoba, including Beausejour, Lac du Bonnet, Oakbank, and Pine Falls.



Being a mental health worker requires her to be an effective collaborator. She works not only with students and parents,

but with social workers, guidance counselors, psychologists, school administration, and resource teachers, to help students overcome mental health issues they face throughout the school year.

This is no small feat. “The mental health needs of our students often exceed their educational needs,” she says. “The earlier I see a student in the school year, the more likely I’ll be able to help them.”

Connie spends half her time at Springfield Collegiate in Oakbank, and the other half at the region’s other schools. She works one-on-one with students on a daily basis. Sometimes the students seek her out directly. Other times, they’re referred to her by school administrators.

“It makes so much sense to have an RPN right there in the school as part of the team,” she says. One reason is that most students prefer not to leave campus to access healthcare support services such as the ones she offers. “And because of their age, most students, who are not yet legal adults, face challenges accessing mental health services in the community. They don’t fit the usual criteria to qualify for those supports.”

### “A special energy”

Becoming an RPN allowed Connie to bring together two passions: nursing and psychology. She discovered both in Grade 8 during a career exploration exercise, “but assumed I’d have to go with one or the other.” A university course in abnormal psychology stoked her fascination with human behaviour. “*Normal* is such a slippery term that rarely applies to anyone. There’s just no such thing,” she says. She earned a BA in

Psychology from the University of Manitoba in 1990, followed by a diploma in psychiatric nursing from Brandon University in 1993.

A practicum at Health Sciences Centre Winnipeg's autism outreach program introduced her to the joys of working with children and families. She gained experience in community health by working in a variety of roles—for instance, counseling abused women and children at Osborne House (now Willow Place), a Winnipeg shelter. Later she moved to BC, then “the hot-spot for RPNs in Canada,” and then returned to Manitoba, where she landed a job at a community mental health organization working with children and adolescents. She remained there for the next 14 years. “I’ve always loved working with kids. They have a special energy.”

Many of the core competencies she developed in her training to become a Registered Psychiatric Nurse are critical to her current role as a mental health worker.

“When I meet with students I draw on ‘Nursing 101’ to diagnose and assess whatever problems they may be facing,” she says.

Another competency she relies on is the ability to build therapeutic rapport. “It’s about fostering trust, respect, and clear boundaries with my students,” she says. “For instance, they know that our relationship never leaves the office. Protecting the confidentiality of my students is absolutely critical.”

She’ll also work with a student’s family and doctors to build a treatment plan and set goals. The plans need to ensure students have the care they need over the summer when she’s not around full-time.

## **Nurse, advocate, educator**

Connie doesn’t just plan and coordinate care for her students. She delivers treatment as well, including cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) and dialectical behaviour therapy. “The latter is a tool that helps my students be mindful of their emotions and impulses in order to handle them better.” Both treatments are similar to those she used when she worked in community health. “Here,” she says, “I tend to use them more often.”

Sometimes she’ll recommend medications for acute conditions, or refer them to a doctor, nurse practitioner, or adolescent psychiatrist for additional care.

Connie is also an important advocate for her students—especially those having difficulty accessing community healthcare. Sometimes when students arrive at a hospital seeking in-patient or emergency care, for instance, they present different symptoms or behaviours from adults with similar concerns. She can step in to provide healthcare providers with important context that helps her students get the care they need.

Her role includes outreach and education. Teachers often ask her to speak to their physical education or family studies classes on topics such as anxiety, depression, and body image. And she frequently delivers presentations to teachers, parent advisory committees, educational assistants and other groups seeking information and tools to help them better support their students, with the following caveat: “As an educator, I have to walk a tightrope between giving them enough information to be helpful, but not enough to encourage them to start diagnosing kids on their own without the proper qualifications.”



Connie has been in the role for two years. When she began, she was the only RPN working in her school division. This fall, the division hired a second mental health worker on a half-time basis. Lesley Eblie Trudel, Sunrise's assistant superintendent of student services, says the division received so much positive feedback about the work Connie was doing "that we wanted to capitalize on it by hiring additional RPN staff."

### **"No limit to the challenges"**

Connie says the need for mental health services in the communities she serves are growing simply because populations in those regions are rising. The stresses and complexities of the modern world are also doing their part to make students more vulnerable to mental health issues.

"There's no limit to the challenges I help students cope with," she says. "They run the gamut, from anxiety and depression to addictions, medications not working, sleep disturbance, eating disorders, trauma, even psychosis."

Trauma in particular can result from a number of causes: abuse, family discord, and exposure to violence in the real world or in media.

As well, social media has really heightened mental health issues for many students, she says. Today's students are always tuned in to what their peers are doing—and are acutely aware of what social activities they're being excluded from. Cyber-bullying is another problem. And so are dramatic programs targeted to

teens that feed them impossible standards or bleak visions of life.

"It doesn't get turned off," says Connie. "They're sitting at the dinner table staring at their phones instead of eating. They're

falling asleep at night with their phones in their hands."

A mother of teenage children herself, she recommends for her clients the same limits to social media consumption she encourages in her own home.

### **A rewarding balance**

Working in education took a little adjustment at first, says Connie. "Health and education are so different. In health, documentation is a huge priority: capturing the service you provided in great detail. In education, what counts is the time we spend working directly with students." Balancing these competing demands has forced Connie to develop new systems to make the most of the limited time she has available for either.

But the rewards of her work are unbeatable, she says.

"Every community and every school I work in is unique. I work with diverse populations, including Indigenous communities. Building greater cultural awareness and adapting to the different needs is critical to what I do and very exciting."

The kids themselves inspire her each and every day.

"You have to be so brave to be able to come up to someone and say, 'I think there's something wrong with me.' It's never easy to ask for help. But they do."