An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. It’s a time-honoured saying in healthcare and good advice for lessening the heartache and the thousand natural shocks, scrapes, cuts and bruises of life.

But sadly, it’s a philosophy that’s often overlooked when it comes to treating patients with mental health issues, says Dr. Paul Parackal, a recent addition to Stratford General Hospital’s Mental Health Services. But prevention through early treatment with the right therapies and supports can be life-changing, altering the trajectory of patient lives and their families for ever.

“I am a believer in being proactive and being preventive. The hope is that we can minimize the gravity of the situation for young patients and steer their course in a way that they can become functional, well-adapted members of society who can achieve whatever goals they set for themselves,” he explains.

Dr. Parackal is new to Stratford General Hospital and has a background that’s truly international... born in India, medical school in China, and residency and fellowship training in Louisville, Kentucky. He recently moved back to Canada with his American wife when his radio “dropped everything,” and they are now increasingly difficult with COVID-19 and the Trump immigration ban. In this case, America’s loss is Stratford’s gain.

Trained in both adult and child/adolescent psychiatry, Dr. Parackal likes variety in his work—“enjoying a little bit of everything.” But his passion for helping children and adolescents experiencing mental health issues and has admiration for their courage and humour is evident. “Even though children and adolescents might be going through tough times, they often show a certain amount of resilience and ability to laugh at themselves that I appreciate, even in cases that are quite traumatic and chaotic,” he says. “I also often see those same qualities in their families—that amazes me as a provider.”

Dr. Paul Parackal

While recognizing the limits of our health care system, Dr. Parackal is a strong advocate for strengthening supports and services locally, investing more into mental health—especially for children. He’d like to see a less fragmented system where youth could be cared for locally, and maybe—“if he had a magic wand”—the creation of three child/adolescent beds in Stratford along with the staff to serve those needs.

While the Stratford General Hospital Foundation, through community support, raised money for the construction of the hospital’s new mental health wing 10 years ago, additional funds from donors and government could pay huge dividends in the future, he says.

“We should be investing in our child and youth populations. I think almost every adult mental health issue arises from childhood years—they don’t just start out of the blue in their adult years,” says Dr. Parackal. “It’s much easier to deal with most mental health issues when people are younger, more resilient, adaptable and flexible. They are our future, so when we provide the appropriate mental health care and give them the tools they need, we’re really investing in your own future.”

It’s estimated that about one in five people in Canada will personally experience a mental health problem or illness in any given year. And while some of the stigma surrounding mental health has decreased in recent years, that’s done little to help many people find the services they need and access them.

“Compared to 20 or 30 years ago, there is a higher level of stress that life puts on us. There are different societal expectations...we live in a more competitive world where everybody is on a treadmill and it’s a rat race,” says Dr. Parackal. “That puts a certain amount of stress on all of us, without teaching us how to manage the expectations and anxieties of everyday life.”

And that was before COVID. Since the pandemic arrived, there’s been a huge increase in anxiety and mood disorders, suicidal thinking and substance abuse with few additional resources to handle what many believe was already a mental health crisis.

“I think the people who are struggling most are those who were already on the brink—people who were hanging in there by doing what they always did to cope. Now with lockdowns and disruptions to their lives, many of those people have fallen off the cliff,” he explains.

Many might think that working with patients and families in crisis and dealing with serious mental health issues might be an overly taxing and exhausting occupation. “Nothing could be further from the truth,” says Dr. Parackal. “When you look at the physical occupation of being a doctor, one of the specialties with the highest satisfaction rate and lowest burn-out rate is psychiatry.”

“Compared to 20 or 30 years ago, there is a revolution in psychiatry and new generations of doctors are coming in, and they’re excited and seem happy with it. That gives me a lot of encouragement to keep doing what I’m doing,” he explains. “There’s a lot of light at the end of the tunnel and a lot of happiness and joy that comes with it. That gives me a lot of encouragement to continue to work in this field.”

Dr. Paul Parackal

Our Doctors Have a Tremendous IMPACT!