

Statement for World Mental Health Day

Honourable Luke Browne

Minister of Health, Wellness and the Environment

October 10, 2016

My fellow Vincentians:

Today is World Mental Health Day, and this year it is being commemorated under the theme “Psychological First Aid.” This particular theme is so full of meaning given our recent experience in St. Vincent and the Grenadines, where we have lost so many of our loved ones through accidents like the Rock Gutter tragedy and adverse weather events like the Christmas Eve Rains of 2013. We need to support our Vincentian brothers and sisters when they are going through difficult and traumatic life events. We must be there for each other. Of course, our counselors have an important role to play in this regard, but, fundamentally, every single citizen could provide a shoulder to lean on, a listening ear and a hand to hold.

We can administer psychological first aid at the scene of an accident where people are hurt. We can administer it to someone who just witnessed the violent death of a loved one. We can administer psychological first aid in the aftermath of many a tragedy, including damage, destruction and death that can come in the wake of a powerful hurricane or tropical storm. As I say this, I think of all the people in Haiti and other countries who suffered and perished in the winds and rains of Hurricane Matthew. I pray for the healing of any mental wounds that exist among those that are alive and remain.

To be effective in these circumstances, we have to learn the basic principles of psychological first aid, just like we would have to learn the principles of ordinary CPR. This would help us to provide support to people who are very distressed – to know what to say and also to know what not to say. There may be individuals in acute distress that need more than psychological first aid (or basic support). These cases should be referred for advanced support from health, mental and social services.

As we commemorate World Mental Health Day 2016, I am happy to report as Minister of Health, Wellness and the Environment that we are on the verge of opening a substantially renovated Mental Health Rehabilitation Centre or Psychiatric Hospital. The renovations cost over \$4 million and were done as part and parcel of my Ministry’s modernisation thrust. It is important for us to note that there is a distinction between a “Mental Home”, as it is popularly called, and a “Mental or Psychiatric Hospital.” This facility is meant to be a site of temporary treatment and care (in a manner somewhat akin to the treatment provided at the Milton Cato Memorial Hospital), so that patients could be allowed to return to enjoy their home community environment in the shortest possible time. It is not a residence.

We are working hard to ensure that we have all the healthcare personnel required to optimally address the needs of persons with mental health problems, and we will enact updated legislation that protects the human rights and dignity of these vulnerable citizens. We must address with passionate single-mindedness and overwhelming force any residual stigma and discrimination that is associated with mental health issues. This has no place in our society. We must extinguish even the smoldering flames that have the ability to burn undetected before flaring up again as a raging fire.

As we commemorate World Mental Health Day, let us keep in mind that many mental disorders result from substance abuse. As citizens, we have a responsibility to help ensure that the use of harmful substances is kept to a minimum, or I would even venture to say eliminated.

There are many people in our society who are suffering in silence from anxiety, depression and similar conditions. Very often they don't even know it. We should become familiar with the signs and symptoms of these ailments so that we could identify them and ensure that everyone affected by these conditions has access to the treatment they need.

On World Mental Health Day 2016, the Ministry of Health Wellness and the Environment reiterates and emphasises its commitment to the delivery of the best possible mental health services at our soon to be re-opened psychiatric hospital, in the communities and elsewhere. There is no health without mental health. Accordingly, the government of St. Vincent and the Grenadines accords the highest priority to addressing the needs of persons with mental health problems. We will leave no stone unturned in promoting their well-being and welfare. This is a sacred duty and a solemn undertaking. We salute everyone directly or indirectly involved in dealing with individuals who are facing mental health issues (including the members of our staff). I call Sr. Diana Bailey who leads the ship at the Mental Health Rehabilitation Centre by name. This is an important calling. I wish our staff, our patients and everyone involved the most bountiful blessings of life.
