



#ResearchersMatter

Dr. Rudolf Uher



Overcoming Risks and Building Opportunities

There is a national dialogue in Canada surrounding mental health and the need for better access to care and research for those struggling from mental illnesses. Dr. Rudolf Uher, the current Canada Research Chair in Early Intervention in Psychiatry, has assembled a team that is developing targeted interventions for young people at risk to develop a mental illness.

“Would we be able to do more for these people if we had the chance to start earlier?”

By working with young people in their formative years, his team is aiming to prevent mental illnesses from ever developing. More than five years after the study began, Rudolf's research team, Families Overcoming Risks and Building Opportunities for Well-Being (FORBOW) team is making a real impact on families living with mental illness.

It is generally accepted that mental illnesses can be linked to genetics and passed down from parent to child - a common concern Rudolf would hear from his patients. “They would say ‘I am worried about my daughter, because she's just like me and I'm worried she will develop the same kinds of problems.’”

A psychiatrist by trade, Rudolf has treated people with severe mental illnesses such as depression, bipolar disorder and psychosis, and would often ask himself if the treatments he was prescribing were the most effective solutions. “We are trying to reverse something that goes back 30-40 years,” says Rudolf. “Would we be able to do more for these people if we had the chance to start earlier?”



FORBOW has recruited a testing group of over 300 children and their parents, meeting with each family once a year, for several years. Rudolf attributes early stage support from the NSHRF for the ability to bring together such an impressive testing cohort. “NSHRF was there from the beginning,” says Rudolf. “That initial funding was absolutely crucial and made it possible to start the study.”



When establishing the study, Rudolf looked at several different intervention methods before settling on a psychological approach. Utilizing cognitive-behavioural therapy techniques, participants learn problem solving skills, coping skills and emotional skills that equip them to overcome difficult problems in the future. “We don’t call it therapy,” says Rudolf. “We call it coaching.”

“NSHRF was there from the beginning.”

While critical research is taking place, Rudolf understands it’s important for the children participating in the study to feel comfortable and enjoy the time they spend with the FORBOW team. “I often hear that the kids are asking if they can come back sooner,” says Rudolf. “It’s great to see them growing up each year.”

The people participating in the study are not the only ones that have taken notice of FORBOW. In October of 2016, Rudolf’s research received national attention, when he was awarded the Royal-Mach-Gaensslen Prize – which celebrates the most promising young mental health researchers in Canada. The \$100,000 prize is a testament to Rudolf’s decision to take a chance and move to Nova Scotia. “People would tell me that it was risky,” says Rudolf. “Seeing national recognition for what we are doing in Nova Scotia is great confirmation that we made the right choice.”



The prize came at the perfect time, as Rudolf was one of only two Canadian Institutes of Health Research grants to be funded in Nova Scotia. Although fortunate to be funded, Rudolf’s proposed budget for the project was cut by close to 40% - which the Royal-Mach-Gaensslen Prize partially made up for. While the national recognition (and funding) is important to the project, Rudolf credits the commitment of the participants in the study and his partners in the mental health community for his success.

“The kids have fun, but we ask a lot of tough questions and it’s not an insignificant amount of people’s time,” says Rudolf. “They come from all over the province and I’m very grateful.”

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Whereas many researchers are focused on publishing their work, Rudolf's team is busy testing new methods and interventions to achieve the best results. However, this long-term approach to studying mental illnesses mean the results of the study will not be known for several years. If you are interested in learning more about Dr. Uher, the FORBOW team, or participating in the study, please visit:

www.forbow.org



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