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Press Release

More open dialogue needed to combat mental health issues: VC Healey

There is a greater need for open conversations about the pressures on young people and the help they need to maintain their mental health.

Fiji National University (FNU) Vice Chancellor, Professor Nigel Healey made these comments during the World Mental Health Day celebrations at FNU's College of Medicine, Nursing and Health Sciences Pasifika Auditorium with the theme "Young People and Mental Health in a Changing World."

Professor Healey urged parents and teachers to help build resilience in young people to ensure that the youngsters are able to cope with everyday challenges at home, school and at university level.

The VC stressed on the need for removing the stigma that is associated with mental health problems. He said the youngsters need to have open dialogue with family or friends about their problems.

"The significance of the theme is that we are increasingly aware that in a changing world of social media, uncertainty over the tuition debt, young people are under a range of unprecedented pressures that impact their mental health," said the VC.

"There is a growing realization of the levels of mental health problems amongst the young. Self-harming, particularly scratching, cutting your arms to relief, is commonplace amongst the young."

Professor Healey said suicide is the second leading cause of death globally amongst 15-29 year olds and that depression is now a major issue for young people, as is 'self-medicating' through the use of alcohol and illicit drugs.

He said one in four people suffer from some form of mental health issues during their lifetime and part of the solution is raising awareness of the resources that is available together with the trained professionals who can assist.

Co-founder of Youth Champs 4 Mental Health, Gary Rounds said there was a need for the society to learn to notice the sign and symptoms of a person suffering from depression.

"We need to learn about the organisations that provide mental health services. But most of all we need to learn to be there for our loved ones when they are down at their very lowest and to give them comfort in knowing that there is someone who is willing to lending a listening ear," said Rounds.

He said the Youth Champs 4 Mental Health's mission is to create more awareness on mental health and suicide prevention and reduce the stigma associated with mental illness.

Meanwhile, Year 4 Medical student of CMNHS, Pauline Fahahiuouiha Faotusia shared her experiences of being away from her home country to pursue her studies.

Originally from Tonga, Faotusia said young people are faced with uncertain futures in the rapidly changing world which makes growing up as an adolescent or young adult in today's world quite challenging.

“Being a regional student is especially a challenge. The biggest challenge of being away from home for me, is having to live outside of that comfort zone that automatically comes with being without family. Being away from home is a challenge to me, because it means leaving behind that safety net that I’ve fallen back on my whole life,” she said.

“With the help of a trusted friend, I managed to survive my battles of loneliness, culture shock and being in a new environment altogether.”

Faotusia said that various interventions and programs need to be put in place to educate youth on how to care for their own mental health and to know how to support friends, colleagues and peers who may be suffering from mental issues.

“A significant challenge of today’s modern age is the increasing access to and use of technology. More and more young people are spending most of their day on the internet and social media,” said Faotusia.

“Internet addiction is an increasing problem and it’s been found that teens can actually show symptoms similar to drug withdrawal when removed from their social media connections.”

“Mental health is just as important as physical health – if not more! But because of the stigma surrounding mental illness, sufferers find it increasingly difficult to seek help. People are so accepting of taking Panadol for headache, cough syrup for the cold, and insulin for diabetes but think it is an embarrassment or a failure if someone is prescribed antidepressants.”

“We can all help break the stigma by supporting each other and speaking openly about mental health. Increasing awareness and education about mental health is a crucial step to breaking down that stigma,” Faotusia added.

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About the Fiji National University: The Fiji National University (FNU) was established through the merger of 7 government-owned tertiary institutions in Fiji, and commenced operations from 1 January 2010. The constituent institutions are found at over 40 different locations across Fiji, and collectively offer Certificates, Diplomas, Advanced Diplomas, Degrees, Postgraduate qualifications and Skills Upgrading for those who are already in employment. Approximately 30,000 students pass through the University each year. Over the last six years of its operations, the University has registered major achievements with regard to new programme delivery, quality improvements and contribution to research and publications via its 5 Colleges: The College of Humanities & Education (CHE), the College of Medicine, Nursing & Health Sciences (CMNHS), the College of Engineering, Science & Technology (CEST), the College of Agriculture, Fisheries & Forestry (CAFF), the College of Business, Hospitality & Tourism Studies (CBHTS) and the National Training & Productivity Centre (NTPC).