





**Kirsten Dale, RCM**  
Property Manager  
MCRS Property Management

# Shining Sunlight on Mental Health

## When and How to Help

COVID aside, our country's mental health crisis continues to escalate, and we have many people living in condos without a support network to assist them. This, in turn, impacts both the communities in which they reside and the manager assigned to help that community function efficiently. Chemical imbalances in the brain can be caused by disease, injury, aging, chronic stress, and even poor nutrition. Any resident in your community may be susceptible to fluctuations in their mental stability caused by the changes in their lives and overall health. But what about those extreme cases? As managers, we have all had instances of dealing with difficult people (so

much so that when I was completing my RCM designation several years ago – there was an entire course offering on the subject). We have likely also had situations where you are not just dealing with a difficult person but a mentally unstable one.

When I was 19, I worked in a North York condominium management office that occasionally had visits from an angry older gentleman who resided in one of the units. The position was a temporary assignment, but I vividly recall one instance where his behaviour became so aggressive towards the assistant manager and myself that I asked him to leave the office. A few years later, I learned from a colleague that this man

threw his sister off their 15th-floor balcony and killed her. I recall another instance at a different site in the GTA where a senior resident with dementia was reported missing, only to be found hours later in his neighbour's bed two floors up, who was quite startled to awake to a strange man sleeping peacefully next to her.

As managers, one of our primary functions is to identify and seek to resolve issues within the corporations and communities we are assigned to manage. Just as you would recognize a potential building condition that could lead to structural concerns, a manager must sometimes identify a burgeoning mental health crisis within their community.



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## Where Do You Turn?

When I began my research for this article, I went to the CAO and the CMRAO websites, and I was disappointed by the lack of resources about mental health in condominiums. While I am sure they are on the horizon, there are currently no links to resources or support for owners or managers on these websites. There are no suggestions on how to document escalating cases or anything to suggest that mental health is even an issue that managers have to deal with. I only found one link to the CAO's Emergency Preparedness Guide that suggested post-emergencies, directors should aid in locating resources for individuals who have suffered either a physical or mental injury, including displaying relevant materials in common areas that provide contact information for physical and mental health services for children, adults, and families; providing spaces for relaxation in common areas with designated quiet areas or times; and/or reminding residents to be patient and encouraging them to behave empathetically towards their condominium neighbours. The guide further suggests that a condominium board may wish to engage relevant professionals for advice or to support residents. While this is helpful advice for a community that has endured a crisis together like a fire or tornado, nothing provides the everyday manager with information on dealing with daily mental health issues within their communities. Next, I checked with a few managers taking their licensing courses and asked if there was anything in today's course materials that speaks to mental health in condos. Aside from some suggestions on getting someone out of your office if you feel unsafe and a few time/stress management tips, there was nothing.

The most helpful and relevant resource I found in my research was on ACMO's website. They have compiled a list of links to help managers deal with situations within their community that require external support – from assault and abuse hotlines to rehab and free mental health services. These are wonderful resources for every manager to keep in their back pocket.

But, if you as a manager are observing a resident sleeping in their car, or receiving complaints from a neighbour that is tired of the constant wall-banging from

the unit next door, or any variation of behaviour that might cause concern for the safety and well being of the community overall, what can you do?

## Make a Log

As with all things in property management, start by logging occurrences. How frequently did the resident wander through the common areas not fully clothed? Was it once in ten years of residency? Or was it 12 times over a 4-month period? Involve your site staff if you have concerns for a specific

resident. They may have information that you do not have about a situation, and they can assist in reporting activity that may indicate broader issues.

## Communicate

Do not shy away from communicating with a resident you believe is struggling. Similarly, do not place yourself in situations where you may be at risk. But, if possible, find ways to communicate that allow you to assess and befriend the struggling individual so that they may feel



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more receptive to suggestions for support that you may be able to offer. Find a way to communicate so that the individual is comfortable engaging with you. If they are not adept with technology, an email is likely not the answer; Pick up the phone or take a neighbour they trust and go to their door for a friendly chat.

### Know When to Seek Support and What Support Exists

A senior resident on the 4th floor has been displaying progressive worsening cognitive issues since his wife passed last Fall. He frequently loses his key fobs and cannot recall his parking space number some days. This morning you noticed him in the lobby heading to check his mail with dried blood on his forehead and a significant bruise indicating he has potentially had a fall. What do you do? As managers, we must walk a fine line with private resident information. If his children are frequently in the building and you know them well (or have their number), a simple call to suggest they may wish to check in on their father may suffice. But sharing information which may provide detail on a personal situation that a resident does

not want a family member to know can be considered a violation of privacy laws, so err on the side of caution if there are concerns. If there is no emergency contact, the manager may wish to reach out to local authorities to perform a wellness check. A wellness check is an in-person visit from one or more police officers in response to a request from someone concerned about a person's mental health. If the individual needs intervention, the officers will assess this and safely assist in seeking support. The Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) is another resource that managers should be familiar with. This nationwide organization promotes mental health and supports people recovering from mental illness through peer support, recovery assistance, workplace mental health initiatives, etc. Another invaluable resource that CAMH offers is the Canada Suicide Prevention Service which provides 24/7 support for anyone concerned about someone else's (or their own) mental well-being.

### Advocate for Community Caring

Something that all managers can do for their communities is help to build

a culture of community caring. Some communities benefit from a Social Committee or Concerned Neighbours Club, which puts together activities to engage residents in positive community interactions regularly. But even an annual barbecue encouraging the residents that live within your buildings to act more like neighbours creates opportunities for positive mental health. It cultivates allies for life in modern society and the toll it can take on our wellness.

Actor Glenn Close is a strong advocate for mental health, and she was quoted to suggest, "what mental health needs is more sunlight, more candour, and more unashamed conversation." Mental health is a real, everyday issue within any community, condominiums included. It is time we gave it some sunlight and conversation. ■

**Kirsten Dale**, RCM, OLCM, is a property manager with MCRS Property Management, based in Huntsville, Ontario, providing condominium management services in Simcoe, Muskoka, Parry Sound and Haliburton. [mymcrs.com](http://mymcrs.com)

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