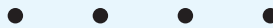




Have the Courage to Thrive

by GAIL M. CARROLL

“Recently I was diagnosed with major depression and generalized anxiety disorder. Did you know that these illnesses are legitimate biological disorders? My doctor says so.”



“Who knew that one call to my EAP could put me in touch with the right help and now thanks to a combination of talk therapy and medication (prescribed by my doctor) I am feeling so much better.”

These quotes come from teachers and other professionals who have been struggling with some type of mental health issue. As you can tell by the comments, there is some fear, surprise and relief in the various comments. Mental health today is changing faces thanks to the help and support of those individuals who have the courage to seek help, journey through recovery and share with the rest of us. Stars and musicians who share their journeys have also had a major impact on reducing the stigma of getting help. Up until the past five to ten years people who experienced any type of mental health issue were often reluctant to call anyone or share with anyone what they were experiencing because of the “fear” of repercussions, i.e., people were fearful others would think they were crazy, see them as weak, fear losing a job or not getting a promotion and fear that people would tell others to stay away from them perpetuating a huge fear of social isolation. Years ago we would hear comments like, “so and so is very low-minded”, referencing a depression or “that’s just their way”, referencing behaviours that were seen as out of the norm.

Stigma was a major roadblock to people speaking out and/or asking for help. People’s fear kept them locked inside their own minds and bodies instead of reaching out for help. A wonderful Newfoundland reference is author, speaker and mental health advo-

cate Jeremy Bennett from Flat Bay, NL. Jeremy’s book, *The Power of the Mind – How I Beat OCD*, has helped many have the courage to speak up and get the help to continue along their journey of health. In his book Jeremy speaks out about growing up in a small community and the struggles he faced inside of his own thoughts about his anxiety and OCD. He read an article written by another person who had experienced anxiety and OCD and had the courage to write about it. This in turn gave Jeremy the courage he needed to speak with his parents and seek his own journey through recovery, which thankfully he writes and speaks openly about today helping many others. Jeremy is one of our local stars. There is also the famous Demi Lovato (singer and songwriter and mental health advocate), who speaks out against stigma and encourages each of us to have the faith and courage to seek help and take the path to recovery. Demi, who has struggled with an Eating Disorder from childhood and has been diagnosed with Bipolar Disorder, inspires so many other people who have similar struggles. Her book, *Staying Strong 365 Days a Year*, has an inspiring quote and advice for each day of your journey through recovery. The famous actress, Glenn Close, has taken a great stand against stigma and stands up for mental health and help through her website www.bringchange2mind.org. Her sister, Jessie, has bipolar disorder and Jessie’s

son, Calen, has schizophrenia. When Glenn Close decided she was going to stand up for change and fight the stigma associated with mental health people told her she was crazy! She said, "Define crazy!" (BP Canada Magazine). Thanks to all of these courageous and beautiful individuals and many more, we are seeing really wonderful shifts in people's approach to mental health. Over the past five to ten years there has been a significant increase in the number of people reaching out for help to counsellors and through employee assistance programs.

The numbers alone say that stigma or fear is not holding people prisoner to their thoughts and fears as often as it may have in the past. Wait lists for publicly funded counselling, mental health programs and psychiatry are often lengthy. In Newfoundland and Labrador, depending on where you live and the ease of access of services, you could be waiting up to 18 months to two years for some services. That is far too long a wait for most. Thanks to comprehensive programs like Johnson Inc. and EAP for Teachers, funding assists teachers in connecting with private mental health counselling resources. Help is there for teachers and readily available. EAPs see an increase in usage each year thanks to the many mental health and anti-stigma campaigns today!

Bell Canada does an amazing job with their "Let's Talk" Campaign! (www.letstalk.bell.ca). I always smile when I receive a call in the EAP because someone was prompted to call for help because Bell's anti-stigma campaign is working and getting the message out there. There is also a wonderful video project right here in our province by Amelia Curran and Roger Maunder – a local campaign to end the stigma of mental health (see www.thisvideo.ca). Thanks to Bell, This Video, the Canadian Mental Health Association, Bipolar Canada Magazine, Esperanza Magazine and many other resources, you as teachers are responding. This truly shows that these campaigns and the dialogue are working. Things are changing for the better. We are taking action every time we speak out openly about mental health and taking care of ourselves and when we stand up for a friend or a colleague or even ourselves when we are coping with a mental health issue or illness.

What are you doing to help? What can you do to help?

- Get involved. Speak out. Let others know how many people are suffering and that it is okay to talk about mental health. Lead by example.
- Choose not to participate in discussions that promote stigma, i.e., don't refer to people with mental illness in derogatory terms. This is very demoralizing and defeats the purpose of what we are trying to accomplish.
- Learn everything you can about the facts surrounding mental illness and share those facts with others. Campaign for wellness days or education sessions at your school. Education sessions are available for teachers through the EAP for Teachers.
- Show your friends and colleagues that you care by practising kindness. A small word, a kind deed can go a long way in assisting someone who is struggling with mental health.

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- Take good care of yourself. Show kindness and compassion towards yourself. Cut yourself a break and don't always expect perfection. Then share that kindness through advice and actions with others.

- Be a good listener. Sometimes all a friend or colleague needs is your ability to let them talk. Be sincere in your responses back. Tell them you are sorry to hear that they are going through such a difficult time. Make sure they know we have a wonderful resource through the EAP for Teachers and if they are not a teacher make sure you suggest they seek out a counsellor or speak with a family physician.
- Keep promises. If your colleague or friend is going through a difficult time and you promise to call them at a certain time or meet them for coffee, keep the promise. It will make a huge difference.

Make a promise to yourself to do your part in fighting the stigma of mental illness. As Mahatma Gandhi would say, "Be the change you wish to see in the world."

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