

Riding out of the shadows for mental health

Who would have thought conversations about mental health challenges and triumphs would create such a stir in our communities this past spring? Maybe it had something to do with bringing a common experience out of the shadows. About one in five Canadians experiences a mental illness or substance use problem in their lifetime. It may also have had something to do with an Olympic champion leading the pack – Clara Hughes. Clara's Big Ride for Bell Let's Talk, a national bicycle tour, conveyed a clear message: talking is the best way to start breaking down the barriers associated with mental illness.

Many people living with a mental illness say the stigma is worse than the symptoms they feel. Experiences of stigma (negative labels) and discrimination (the behaviour that results from these negative labels) are the greatest barriers to living a fulfilling life. Stigma and discrimination are barriers that prevent many from seeking help.

Stigma often comes from fear and misunderstanding of people with mental health illness. There are many ways you can help reduce stigma and discrimination in your community.

- Educate yourself and others about mental illness. www.heretohelp.bc.ca is a good place to start for information. Mental Health First Aid courses are also available in many communities and can improve your mental health literacy, skills and knowledge to help people in your community.
- Meet and talk with people who can share their experiences of mental illness and recovery.
- Be aware of your attitudes, behaviour and language. See a person beyond their mental illness, for who they are, their dreams and unique qualities.
- Focus on the positive. Mental health is only one part of who people are. Let's recognize positive successes in people's lives.
- Be inclusive of everyone. People with mental health and substance use problems have a right to an equal part in society. This includes access to jobs, housing, recreation and other services.

Finally, on the theme of stigma reduction and promoting community discussion, September 10 is World Suicide Prevention Day. This year, the Canadian Association for Suicide Prevention (CASP) and the Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC) have partnered to promote this year's theme "Connecting Canada." The theme is intended to highlight that being connected with oneself, with others, and a community is critical to one's sense of hopefulness and well-being. Be on the lookout for World Suicide Prevention Day events happening in your community.

And remember, help is available. If you or someone you care about is currently in crisis, call 1-888-353-2273 (1-888-353-CARE) or visit the following websites for information: <http://www.crisiscentre.bc.ca> and <http://youthinbc.com/>

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