THE CATALYST

We are not the villains in the movies

Watching a friend spiral reminded me how stigma keeps many from seeking help.

By: Nicole Chevrier | Posted: July 6, 2023

A friend of mine is struggling with her mental health. Something happened recently that sent her life into a tailspin, and she is having trouble coping. She can't stop crying and is barely eating and sleeping. She has lived with depression for a long time, and it's been manageable, but now she is at an all-time low. I'm worried about her. I've been talking to her about it, and I suggested she get some help from a therapist, but she isn't ready. "I'll just find a way to get through it on my own," she says. Sound familiar?

I know firsthand that it can be tough to recognize when you need help. Years ago, when I was going through a major life crisis, it took me too long to ask for help. Later, I could see that I should have reached out to someone sooner. Why is it so hard to ask for help with our mental health? Would it surprise you to know that 60% of people with a mental health problem don't seek help?

The power of stigma

That's the power of stigma. I was worried about what people would think. The shame of admitting to myself that I was having a problem was so paralyzing that it kept me from getting help. I became filled with self-doubt. I started to lose trust in myself. Was I going to become one of 'those people'? My imagination went wild with images of dismal institutions with bars on the windows and shock therapy.

The world influences our beliefs

Where did I get these ideas? We can call it cultural conditioning. We have been influenced to think of mental illness as frightening and debilitating and to see people who are dealing with mental health problems as unstable, violent, or dangerous. The media plays a big part in perpetuating the harmful stereotypes of mental illness. Mass media, television, and film have been shaping our ideas for a long time about what mental health and mental illness look like. The villains in the movies are so often characterizations of a person with a mental health condition. There are countless depictions of people with a diagnosis of schizophrenia portrayed as violent, unstable, and dangerous. These are not accurate or fair representations.

Just as media needs to be viewed with a critical eye, we should check our own assumptions about mental health and mental illness. We can inform ourselves about the facts, and we can learn how to be better allies to others.

5 Ways you can help

Everyone has a role to play in creating an inclusive community. Here are 5 ways you can help:

1. Get the facts. Educate yourself about mental illness and share with family, friends, work colleagues, and classmates.
2. Get to know people with personal experiences of mental illness so you learn to see them for the person they are rather than their illness.
3. Be aware of your attitudes and behaviour. Choose your words carefully. Avoid stigmatizing people by seeing the person first and not labelling them by their mental illness.
4. Challenge myths and stereotypes. You can help challenge stigma by speaking up when you hear people around you make negative or wrong comments about mental illness.
5. Treat everyone with dignity and respect. Offer support and encouragement.

Where to find help

All those years ago, I wish help had been easier to find. Things have changed! If you or someone you care about might need some support, there are many options now. Here are some suggestions:

Wellness Together Canada (2020-2024)

To connect with a mental health professional one-on-one:

- call 1-888-668-6810 or text WELLNESS to 686868 for youth
- call 1-866-585-0445 or text WELLNESS to 741741 for adults

Kids Help Phone

Call 1-800-668-6868 (toll-free) or text CONNECT to 686868. Available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week to Canadians aged 5 to 29 who want confidential and anonymous care from trained responders.

Visit the Kids Help Phone website for online chat support or to access online resources for children and youth.

Mental Health Services across Canada

Find a Canadian Mental Health Association in your area

Hope for Wellness Help Line: 1-855-242-3310

Offers immediate mental health counselling and crisis intervention to all Indigenous peoples across Canada. Phone and chat counselling is available in English, French, Cree, Ojibway and Inuktitut.

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