



Mental Health
Commission
of Canada

Commission de
la santé mentale
du Canada

International expert on mental health stigma says world can learn from Canadian program

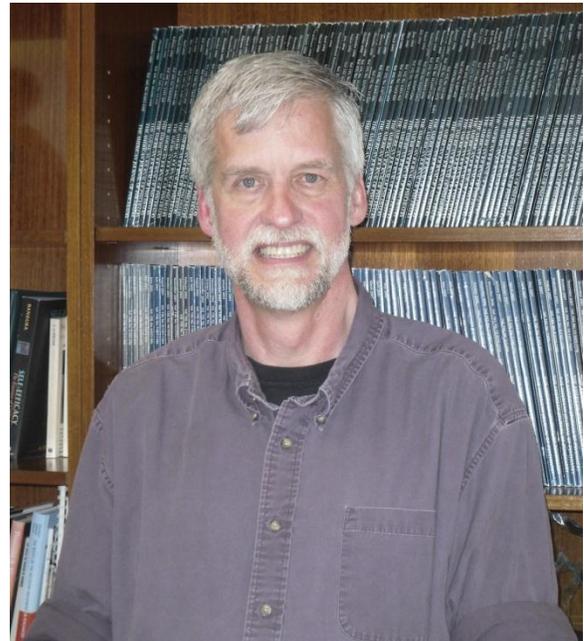
By Jen Jensen

The meeting at one of the largest mental health facilities in Canada in July was subdued. The academics, experts and medical professionals gathered around the tables at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health in Toronto were discussing how to create an action plan to reduce stigma against mental health and addiction clients at three community health centres in the city. Serious business, so everyone listened respectfully and nodded politely as one advisor after another made their presentations.

And then Patrick Corrigan got up to speak and changed the dynamic completely. One attendee later described him as “a sparkplug” for the energy, ideas and excited chatter he generated.

Corrigan has lived with major depression and anxiety disorder for 30 years. He credits his ongoing recovery to counseling, medication and a loving wife whose unwavering support still occasionally brings him to tears.

But Corrigan wasn't there to talk about his illness or the stigma he's experienced. He was speaking as one of only a handful of international experts in this area of research. A Distinguished Professor and the Associate Dean of Psychology Research at the Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago, stigma is an issue



Patrick Corrigan is an international expert on mental health and stigma.

about which Corrigan is passionate, committed and determined.

“While stigma is scholarly issue for me, it's fundamentally an issue of social justice,” he says. “I'm a person with serious mental illness, so I understand the stigma and that also motivates me.”

Corrigan explains the two most common forms of stigma are public stigma - when people have negative attitudes about mental illness and discriminate against the people with the illness,

and self-stigma - when those ill people turn the negativity toward themselves. Corrigan says he experienced the latter, having felt weak, worthless and too ashamed to tell anyone for many years.

And he has become all too familiar with public stigma through his work with people with psychiatric disabilities. So much so, Corrigan believes he would have eventually fallen into this area of research because of how he saw his clients being affected.

“I am a clinical psychologist trying to help people with a mental illness get their lives back, but a lot of them couldn’t get jobs or live on their own because employers and landlords were all buying into the stigma.”

Corrigan figured if he was truly going to help those labeled seriously mentally ill, this was where he needed to focus his work. Of the 12 books and 300 academic papers he’s written, nearly half are about stigma. Unfortunately, there will have to be many more.

“The stigma problem is worsening,” he sighs. “That’s a sobering thought given that people living in the western culture are as educated as they’ve ever been.”

The figures in Canada alone are alarming. Consider that 70% of people with a mental illness say its onset began before they turned 18. Now consider that 40 % of parents say they would never tell anyone if their child had a mental illness – including their doctor. The parent’s attitudes toward the illness can prevent the child from getting crucial, early treatment.

Stigma will pose a barrier to treatment for many of the seven million Canadians who need help for mental illness this year. Two thirds of

people with symptoms won’t seek treatment. And many who do will be dismissed by healthcare providers. It is little wonder that many of these people say the stigma is often worse than the illness itself.

And yet it is right here in Canada where Corrigan says some of the best solutions to the problem might be found.

“The Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC) is very wisely viewing the stigma issue as one small battle and one small victory at a time,” he says.

The MHCC was formed in 2007 with a mission to promote mental health and change the attitudes of Canadians toward mental health problems. Three years ago it launched Opening Minds, an initiative that is evaluating dozens of anti-stigma programs throughout the country, with an initial focus on projects targeting healthcare providers, youth and the workforce. Opening Minds will take the best of those programs and help roll them out across Canada, ensuring their content is tailored to each specific community.

“I think it’s courageous what the people at Opening Minds are doing,” says Corrigan. “Instead of just going with a single, nation-wide education campaign, they’re investing instead at a local level.”

“It is so validating to hear that a world renowned researcher like Patrick Corrigan believes in what we are doing,” says Micheal Pietrus, the Director of Opening Minds.

A key criterion for the programs Opening Minds is evaluating is that they include contact-based education, which means having someone with a mental illness speak directly to the groups whose actions they want to change.

Pietrus explains that while social marketing campaigns can sometimes positively influence people's attitudes, they don't change their behaviours in the way personal contact does.

Opening Minds will release some of the initial results of program evaluations in the fall, but Pietrus says the preliminary findings are encouraging.

"What we're hearing back in many cases is that while these programs didn't need a huge investment of money or resources, they made an enormous difference."

Pietrus and Corrigan both stressed the importance of contact-based education to the crowd during that July meeting at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) in Toronto.

Jaime Sapag, Special Advisor to the Office of International Health at CAMH, says it was an eye opener.

Sapag and Akwatu Khenti, Director of the Office of International Health, are the principal investigators who have partnered with three community health centres in Toronto to tailor a plan to reduce stigma and discrimination among primary healthcare workers. Each of the centres has a large immigrant community who use its services and the partners are focusing on reducing stigma against mental health and addiction clients from Latin America, Africa and the Caribbean.

"The importance of culture cannot be overstated when trying to prevent stigma and promote recovery," says Sapag, who is now likely to include contact-based education as part of the initiative. CAMH is also going to be a partner project with Opening Minds and will share research with each other.

"We also realized after hearing from Micheal Pietrus and Patrick Corrigan that people with a mental illness must be involved in both the planning and implementation."

Corrigan is, of course, delighted.

"The source of stigma change lies with the person who has lived with the illness," he says. "They are the best educators for the public. What I'm seeing with CAMH and the MHCC are local, long-term investments that will get badly needed results."