



**Speaking notes**

*by*

*The Honourable Michael Kirby,*

*Chair, Mental Health Commission of Canada*

Launch of the MHCC's 'Opening Minds' Anti-stigma / Anti-discrimination initiative

*The Calgary Tower, Alberta, Calgary*

*FRIDAY 2 OCTOBER, 2009*

Thank you, Mike, and good morning everyone.

Isn't it great to see the flame burning bright on top of the Calgary Tower this morning?

We lit the flame today as a beacon of hope for the millions of Canadians living with mental illness, and to mark the official launch of our *Anti-stigma / Anti-discrimination Initiative*, an initiative to reduce the prejudice they experience. It is the largest systematic effort of its kind in Canadian history.

- *It's time* for individuals with mental health problems to live free of stigma and discrimination.
- *It's time* for them to move out of the shadows forever and into the light of equal opportunity in Canadian society.
- *It's time* for us to remove the labels they're branded with – (MK RIPS OFF THE RED STIGMA SIGNS OVER FRENCH AND ENGLISH SIGNS) – just like this.

Our goal is *Opening Minds* across Canada, and that's the name of this new initiative: *Opening Minds*. Many people living with mental illness report that stigma – and the way they're treated by family, friends and co-workers – causes them more suffering than their illness itself.

Stigma is ugly, harmful and regressive.

Stigma is defined as “a stain on one's good name”, “a mark of shame and disgrace.”

No person experiencing a mental illness should have to bear such a heavy burden.

No Canadian should have to feel shame or fear, or experience discrimination because they're living with a mental illness today or have experienced one in the past.

And yet, they still do.

The stigma surrounding mental illness influences virtually everyone – parents and family members...service and health care providers...teachers and employers.

Even people experiencing mental health issues burden *themselves* with self-stigma arising from their own fears and misconceptions.

Stigma remains one of the major barriers preventing people living with a mental illness from talking about their illness...from seeking help...and from receiving treatment.

For example, four out of five Canadians believe depression is a life-threatening illness, yet only 30 per cent of people with depression seek help, partly because of the stigma still attached to mental illness.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Boyd, Leslie. "Strategies to Fight Depression Improve More than just Mood." Citizen-Times June 13 2007. Reference appears on Great-West Life's website: <http://www.gwlcentreformentalhealth.com>.

Contrary to popular misconception, recovery is possible for the vast majority of people. They can become fully functioning citizens and family members. They can lead full and rich lives within the limitations imposed by their illness, just as people live with asthma, diabetes or arthritis.

So, by *Opening Minds*, by eliminating stigma and fear of discrimination, we can improve the outcomes for people who experience a mental illness.

- *It's time* to offer Canadians living with mental illness real hope...real support...and real solutions for treatment and recovery.

*Opening Minds* will initially target two groups – youth aged 12 to 18; and health-care professionals – specifically, the medical front lines of family doctors, nurses and Emergency Rooms.

The Commission will work with 20 youth and 15 health-care programs in communities across Canada already offering something called ‘contact-based education’ to reduce stigma.

In case you're not familiar with the term ‘contact-based education’ means people who have lived with mental illness telling their stories, sharing their experiences, and explaining their road to recovery. We'll be doing this with youth and health-care audiences. We're going to evaluate the 35 programs, and then replicate the best ones across the country.

We've adopted this approach because in other countries, contact-based education has proven to be the most effective way to break the vicious circle of stigma and discrimination.

We're focusing on youth because most mental illnesses begin before the age of 18.

And yet, two-thirds of youth say that fear, embarrassment, peer pressure and stigma are major barriers to them seeking help.

Through *Opening Minds*, we'll make it easier for young people to get help and treatment.

*Opening Minds* is focusing on health-care professionals because stigma – albeit often unintended – also persists within the health care system.

Anecdotally, we've learned that mental health patients don't feel treated with respect and dignity by health care providers. They're sent to the back of the line in emergency departments, even if they're in serious distress, because physical ailments are seen to take precedence over mental ones.

In its second year, *Opening Minds* will broaden its focus to include the Canadian workforce. We believe it's in the interest of all organizations to address stigma and discrimination and improve the mental health of their employees. In addition to the human impact, the economic price tag of mental illness in the workplace is staggering – costing the Canadian economy an estimated \$33 billion a year.

After that, we'll broaden our *Opening Minds* initiative even further to include seniors; First Nations, Métis and Inuit; and other audiences.

Through the *Opening Minds* initiative we have also just begun a public awareness campaign using a variety of media aimed at both general and specialized audiences – all targeted at destigmatizing mental illness by highlighting real stories of hope and recovery.

Canada's mental health challenge is enormous. This year, seven million Canadians will experience a mental health problem. That's one person in five; and that person could be a colleague at work, a neighbour, or a family member.

It's sad to say, but many of these people will not get help because either they can't access services or they're too ashamed or afraid to come forward due to the stigma associated with mental illness. By targeting stigma and discrimination, *Opening Minds* offers every Canadian living with mental illness real hope and raises the potential for treatment and recovery.

Given the history of society's deep-seated fears and misconceptions about mental illness, this may sound like a daunting task but I believe it can be done.

One only has to look at breast cancer and HIV/AIDS – both good examples of how public attitudes have been changed through concerted efforts to raise awareness and break down age-old prejudices. They've successfully dealt with stigma, and we will too.

I'm very optimistic about the potential for *Opening Minds*.

The flame of hope is still burning bright on top of the Calgary Tower.

It marks the beginning of the end of the stigma and discrimination we have associated with mental illness, and the start of a bright, new day for all Canadians.

Thank you.