

You're not alone: workshops help reduce stigma through storytelling

By Jen Jensen

"Life," says Constantin Nastic, "is great today." That's a remarkable statement from someone who has lived with severe depression and anxiety for many years.

Despite his challenges, Constantin has managed to get his life back on track. He has shared his personal story at workshops attended by health care professionals and helped change their attitudes and improve the way mental health patients are treated on a daily basis.

As part of his personal story, Constantin recalled his time spent in a psychiatric ward. "I couldn't escape the pain and the darkness inside of me. The medication wasn't working, and it had nothing to do with drinking or drugging; the partying had stopped a long time ago. This had everything to do with my mental illness."

With a bungee cord hidden in his shorts, he planned to strangle himself because "the system hadn't helped much in the last decade anyway," he says. But before he got the chance, a nurse entered his room, put her hand on his arm, and said, "Constantin, I can't imagine what pain you're going through, but we're going to work together, and we're going to find a way to help you. You're not alone."

That pivotal moment, a simple but profound act of kindness by a nurse, changed his life. He says his journey toward recovery was like a puzzle, with pieces falling into place over time. And when he met that one kind nurse in the hospital, he decided to start helping himself get better.

Hospitals were something Constantin had been trying to avoid, because he often experienced stigma from frontline workers who were too clinical and rigid. "It's not an environment that made me want to open-up with a complete stranger who didn't seem to care or would look down on me." His tendency to shut down would then get him labelled as non-compliant or uncooperative, worsening an already difficult situation. "I never felt any compassion when I visited emergency rooms," he says.

Well into recovery, Constantin is now a full-time Peer Support Facilitator for the Streamlined Access Team at the York Support Services Network. He is on a mission to make a difference by sharing his story and was given the opportunity to do so at Ontario's Central Local Health Integration Network's (LHIN) workshops entitled "Mental Health and Addictions: Understanding the Impact of Stigma."

During the workshops, Constantin drew on his experience in recovery and the hospital system to better connect with individuals and families, ensuring they were directed the services that best suit their needs as quickly as possible.

The Central LHIN's Education Work Group was given a huge task to provide mental health education," says Arla Hamer, who chaired the workshop's Work Group at the time. On a tight deadline and an even tighter budget, her team developed a strategy to focus their efforts. "Intuitively, with all of us being mental health professionals, we recognized that the way to have the greatest impact was to address stigma," Hamer says.

The workshops have since been presented to about 900 health care professionals working in different hospitals and health care sites across the region.

The Central LHIN entered into a partnership with the Mental Health Commission of Canada's (MHCC) anti-stigma initiative called Opening Minds. Opening Minds is partnering with and conducting evaluations of programs across the country that have been designed to reduce the stigma commonly experienced by people living with a mental illness. Many say it is harder to live with the stigma than the illness itself.

An early preview of the Opening Minds' evaluation of the Central LHIN program indicated the program did change some attitudes and reduced stigma. Following the workshops, there was a 25 per cent increase among health care provider participants who agreed employers should hire people with a mental illness. Also, an increase of 40 per cent said they would be willing to admit to colleagues if they had a mental illness. And there was a 35

Constantin Nastic Peer Support Facilitator speaking at the Central LHIN's "Mental Health and Addictions:



Understanding the Impact of Stigma."

per cent increase in participants who agreed it is their responsibility to encourage recovery in people with a mental illness. The full evaluation report will be released by the MHCC in the next few months.

Joanna Meeke attended the Newmarket workshop. A case manager at LOFT/ Crosslinks Housing and Support Services, Joanna works with many who suffer from a mental illness. Wondering why some are reluctant to seek help from a psychiatrist, she asks "if you fall off the deck, break your leg and experience a lot of pain, you go to the hospital and get a cast, right?"

Workshop participants received information about myths related to mental illness and the role stigma plays as a major barrier to people seeking help. But according to the evaluations, the highlight was stories from people like Constantin: personal testimonials from individuals living with a mental illness about the challenges they've faced, the stigma they've experienced, and what has helped them recover.

Recovery is often defined as reaching a point when a person with a mental health problem is able to get on with life, just like someone who learns to live with arthritis or diabetes. Similar to a physical illness, recovery is possible.

Constantin had a positive impact on the workshop's audience, not only because he shared his personal story, but also because he is mentally healthy enough to stand in front of them and speak. Many health care workers rarely get insight into recovery once their patients move beyond their mental health crisis.

Because the Central LHIN program has proven to be effective at reducing stigma, Opening Minds is now helping to replicate it in other health regions across the country. In British Columbia, the Interior Health Authority adapted the Central LHIN program to deliver it to health care providers in seven communities this fall. Once again, Opening Minds is evaluating how effective the program is in each different setting. The MHCC sees its role as being a catalyst to make change. Ontario's Central LHIN is helping make that goal a reality.

Results: The Opening Minds research team has collected the preliminary results for *Mental Illness and Addictions: Understanding the Impact of Stigma* and has determined that the program is an ideal starting point which could be revised and refined for further national roll-out. The program showed positive changes when comparing attitudes and knowledge before and after the program. However, a need to sustain the positive results was identified. Further education such as booster sessions or more phases of anti-stigma training, as well as replicating the initial program in other settings will help achieve this. Opening Minds is currently working with the Central LHIN on creating a Phase II plan that will work towards strengthening the entire program.