



Recovery — hope for the future, hope for today

BY MICHELLE SCOTT

Until relatively recent times the idea of recovery as it pertains to mental health was unheard of. In the recent past people with mental health issues were commonly viewed as permanently infirm, with no hope of rehabilitation or recovery. Up until the 1960s, people were institutionalized and pushed to the fringes of society. Over the past few decades Canada has seen a shift in treatment and attitudes towards mental health issues. Governments and healthcare providers alike have realized that institutionalization and isolation is not the answer. They have realized that helping individuals develop the tools and skills that they need in order to live a fulfilling life as a contributing member of society is a far more effective method of mental healthcare. Healthcare providers and supporters can encourage people to take charge of their own recovery and realize that they have the ability to make positive changes in their lives. Fortunately, we now live in a time when many mental healthcare programs promote this recovery-

oriented paradigm. More and more, people are realizing that a diagnosis of a mental illness is not a life sentence – people are realizing that there is hope for recovery.

Recovery can have many definitions. It can be described as the process by which people with mental health challenges regain the ability to live fulfilling lives. For many this involves activities such as finding employment, pursuing education, building personal relationships, and taking part in meaningful hobbies. Whether this involves the complete absence of symptoms or the management of symptoms depends on the individual. In the past, people with mental health issues were discouraged from taking on new tasks and challenges and were often socially isolated from the community. However, recent research shows that activities such as working towards education and employment and building meaningful relationships can make a marked positive difference in the lives of those with mental health issues. People with mental health challenges are no different

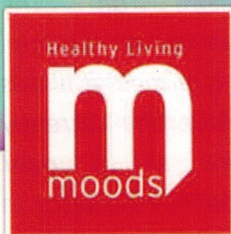
from anyone else – all of us benefit from meaningful activities and feeling connected with others. Increasingly, programs are working under these guiding principles of recovery and are offering recovery-oriented services.

The paradigm of recovery has recently gained support from the Canadian federal government. The Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC) was developed in 2007 in response to a need to study mental health and addictions issues and trends in Canada. The MHCC developed a mental health strategy for Canada. The purpose of this strategy is to transform Canada's mental healthcare system by providing recommendations for action and strategic directions for care. One of these strategic directions

involves fostering recovery and mental well-being for people of all ages. This strategy has helped promote the paradigm of recovery in mental healthcare services throughout the country.

While a recovery model of mental healthcare is something that can be applied throughout any stage of life, it does highlight the importance of youth access to mental healthcare. About 70 per cent of mental illnesses have an onset in early childhood, and 14 - 25 year-olds are more likely than any other age group to report symptoms of mental illness. The earlier that signs and symptoms are identified, the earlier treatment can begin, which leads to a greater chance of an individual being able to enter adulthood with the tools needed to live a

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understanding

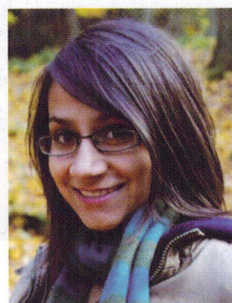
healthy, fulfilling life.

And yet, currently only 20 per cent of children who require mental health services in Canada receive them. This is largely due to the fact that government-funded mental healthcare services for youth often have long wait times. Families who can afford private mental healthcare services can receive help from these services, but children from other families are often left on waiting lists for months or even years at a time. During this time the mental state of these children often deteriorates, sometimes with devastating outcomes.

Fortunately, many people are waking up to the fact that early intervention in mental healthcare is important. The MHCC has several initiatives developed to address the needs of youth, including the Youth Council, a council of young people with lived experience who help provide a voice for youth in policy-making and who help connect youth in the community to mental healthcare services. The majority of mental healthcare facilities offer youth-specific programs, and organizations such as the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) also provide services for youth and families. Recovery is made all the more possible if children and youth can receive the help that they need at an early stage. By receiving help from recovery-oriented mental healthcare programs, youth can learn recovery tools and strategies that they can take with them into adulthood.

This is a hopeful time for those experiencing mental health issues and for their families. More and more people are waking up to the fact that recovery is possible and

that recovery-oriented services are helpful to anyone experiencing these issues. This new culture of recovery is beneficial to everyone involved. It means a better quality of life for mental healthcare recipients and their families, greater independence from mental healthcare facilities, and a greater number of contributing members of society. Being a member of a community and having warm, supportive relationships is integral to mental well-being, and recovery-oriented programs can help connect individuals with the support they need. We can all do our part to promote this culture of recovery in mental healthcare. A large part of this involves challenging the negative conceptions and stigma surrounding mental illness. Mental health issues affect more people than one would expect – about one in five Canadians will personally experience mental health issues during their lifetime. But now we know that a diagnosis is not a life sentence. There is hope for recovery. ■



Michelle Scott obtained her Bachelor of Arts (Hons) from the University of Toronto. She is a mental illness survivor. She currently works as a peer support worker in a recovery-oriented

mental healthcare program for young adults. She is also the volunteer communications co-ordinator at Riverwalk Eating Disorders and Wellness Centres. She intends to pursue a Masters Degree in Social Work.