

## Stigma-The Unhealthiest Word in Mental Health

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Patrick Connors-Toronto: Dave Gallson is the Associate National Executive Director for the Mood Disorders Society of Canada. I recently interviewed him on a variety of pertinent mental health topics, the responses to which could keep me busy and you informed for some time!

A national survey which lead to a press release on September 28 regarding the gaps that may be preventing optimal care of depression. The word which gets brought up a lot is stigma. I asked Dave what MDSC can do to help break down that stigma?

“The stigma which exists within society towards persons who have a mental illness is extremely harmful and cruel to Canadians and their families. The definition of stigma is: a perceived negative attribute that causes someone to devalue or think less of the whole person. People tend to distance themselves from individuals in stigmatized groups, to blame individuals in these groups for perceived negative attributes, and to discriminate against and diminish the stigmatized individuals.

“Stigma prevents many persons from seeking help when they are experiencing issues and leads to exacerbation of the symptoms. We look back 20-30 years ago and remember that in most communities, if a person identified with having a mental illness, in many instances their families were ostracized and almost blamed for having a fault. Today, thankfully in many aspects, the greater amount of public discussion surrounding mental illness is slowly beginning to permeate the public’s understanding and support of those who are affected. Still, a great deal of stigma and discrimination still lingers in every community in Canada. This takes place in different ways, it happens for youth in schools and through social media. We hear about these incidents, unfortunately all too often, and tragically, on the evening news. It happens in workplaces throughout every town and city. When an employee is too afraid to approach their supervisor to tell them they are experiencing depression, because they strongly feel that the supervisor will look down upon them, or hold it against them in terms of promotion and/or more responsibility in the future; that is stigma and discrimination.

“The MDSC has done an extensive amount of research on stigma and discrimination and have looked at it from all vantage points including from the viewpoint of those who live with stigma and discrimination every day, as well as through the viewpoint of professionals. In 2006, the MDSC brought together 90 mental health stakeholders (including consumers, family members, researchers, policy makers, politicians, and clinicians), from every region of Canada to a 3-day workshop on Stigma. The goals of the workshop were to bring together those who experience stigma with those who want to address it and develop a comprehensive researcher and consumer and family focused research agenda; to develop materials to inform the newly created Mental Health Commission of Canada in their early stages; to encourage an exchange of ideas and build collaborative research teams and networks; and to develop national and international partnerships among funders, researchers and stakeholders.”

Then, I asked what the media and especially the general public can do to work with MDSC and other mental health care providers to help break down that stigma?

“In terms of what the media can do, exactly what you are doing here: Provide a format to get these messages and points out to Canadians.

“In terms of what the general public can do:

“1: Support your co-workers through asking your employer about what mental health policies they have in their workplaces. Does management have any training in spotting employees with mental health distress? If they notice this, are they able to approach staff and discuss it? Does the staff feel comfortable speaking to management if they are going through mental health issues? Are there any resources available to them? Is the work environment overly stressful? Does the company have policies on work/life separation? Etc.

“2: Offer to help. Whether it is through volunteering to an organization, or providing an outlet for information dissemination you are helping our community.

“3: Talk to someone. If you are going through any type of mental health issues reach out and speak to a friend, family member, trusted associate or professional. Do Not Suffer in Silence!

“4: Help us through spreading the message. No matter if it is at work, at a friend’s, during a lunch or anywhere, start conversations about mental health and encourage people to openly talk about it. We need to take mental illness out of the back rooms of the nation and bring the conversations to the dining tables.

“5: Help us help everyone understand that it is not their fault to have a mental health issue. It is ok to experience depression or other issues during your life. We are all only human and these things are a part of being human.

“6: It is not OK to take part in any type of stigma and discrimination. It is not funny. It is mean and it hurts people. If you hear it happening, speak out against it.”

Part two of this series will be published later in December by Patrick Connors.