

MENTAL ILLNESS AWARENESS WEEK: OCTOBER 6TH - 12TH

Living with Mental Illness: My Journey



By Daniel Miller

I've lived with mental illness for a little under four decades now. My underlying condition is obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), but I've also had months-long bouts of debilitating clinical depression and extreme anxiety. I've experienced prolonged suicidal ideation (thoughts of suicide) when I was in my late teens / early twenties, and again a few years ago. I've taken multiple medications over the years to control my symptoms and I've had several therapists. I've been hospitalized once due to mental illness. I've undergone electroconvulsive therapy (ECT).

Several years ago, I wouldn't have been willing to write this article. But I'm not going to hide anymore.

The first manifestation of my OCD came during my early adolescence in Toronto, in grade 7 or 8. I couldn't convince myself that my combination lock was truly locked, and I'd pull on it over and over, unable to get

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away from my locker. In grade 9, I experienced the first of what are referred to by clinicians as "intrusive thoughts"—while walking from the subway to see a therapist who specialized in anxiety disorders, I suddenly had the thought that I could "forget" how to walk. Throughout high school, I battled my checking behaviours and intrusive thoughts such as believing I

would tear up my test or exam the moment I was finished writing it (or worse, make a lunge and tear up all the other students' papers); dreading that, somehow,

I suffered debilitating anxiety for the first time—a feeling of dread that I couldn't shake, out of all proportion to the actual duties and responsibilities that were on my plate at the time.

I'd write a vulgar insult against the teacher in my essays; fearing that I'd suddenly jump in front of the subway train as it came into the station.

I went through my first severe clinical depression in my second year at the University of Toronto, and another in my final year there. During each of those depressions, I fought suicidal ideation (in tears, I told my family that I "didn't want to go away"). I was helped through those years by a psychiatrist who specialized in OCD. He put me on Prozac (the first successful SSRI), and I stayed on it for many years afterwards. I'm on it now.

In Sept. 2007, in my second year as a full-time faculty member in the Religion Department at Bishop's University, I suffered debilitating anxiety for the first time—a feeling of dread that I couldn't shake, out of all proportion to the actual duties and responsibilities that were on my plate at the time.

In early 2014, during the first month of a half-year sabbatical, I crashed...hard. I felt that crushing anxiety again, and only two days after it struck it was combined with a deep depression. My sabbatical became a sick leave. I had two short recoveries in the late spring and late summer (in between which I crashed again). I began the fall of 2014 teaching three courses, but in mid-October the anxiety and depression returned and I had to withdraw from all of them. Shortly thereafter, experiencing severe suicidal ideation, I was voluntarily hospitalized. But I derived no benefit from my hospitalization and returned home after only about a week. I tried to teach only one course in the winter of 2015, but my depression prevented me from being able to think or concentrate properly, and I was constantly exhausted.

With all of us—I, my wife, the rest of my family—at the end of our ropes with my condition, and having seemingly exhausted all other options, I moved back in with my parents in Toronto and underwent 16 treatments of ECT at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) in May and June. Sensitive to the fact that my memory was essential to my career, CAMH gave me the least invasive form of ECT, but even so I had to relearn some everyday tasks when I returned to Lennoxville and some of my memories were erased. The ECT also had the effect of ruling out any teaching in the fall of 2015.

When I went back to the classroom again in the winter of 2016, my self-confidence had been shattered, my self-esteem was at zero. But, as the weeks went on and I looked out into the room and saw that my students actually cared about what I was saying, I began to believe again that I mattered, that I had something to offer. I gradually regained my confidence, my sense of purpose and my self-esteem.

In Jan. 2017, I gave the keynote address for Mental Health and Wellness Week at Bishop's.

With my story now "out there", I've been liberated from my self-imposed shackles of secrecy about my condition. I've felt free to share with students, and others, my nearly 40-year history of living with mental illness, and to give to them whatever comfort or guidance I can.

To reassure them that they're not alone.

Daniel Miller is Chair of the Department of Religion at Bishop's University. Since speaking publicly in early 2017 to the Bishop's community about living with mental illness, he has become involved in a number of ventures at the university and in the community focusing on mental health (including Mental Health Estrie), and has spoken specifically about OCD in courses taught by the Bishop's Psychology Department.

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Resources:

Mental Health Estrie: Support for English-speaking families and individuals affected by a mental illness. Peer support groups. One-on-one support. Information and referral. Educational events. Lending Library. Web: www.mentalhealthestrie.com Phone: 819-565-3777 Email: mhe.info@bellnet.ca

Urgence Detresse Crisis Hotline: 819-780-2222

Suicide Prevention Hotline Across Quebec: 1-866-APPELLE

Info Santé: 811 (option 1 for a nurse, option 2 for a social worker)

CLSC: Call 811 to find your local number

CHUS Hotel-Dieu & Fleurimont Hospitals: 819-346-1110

Order of Psychologists (Hotline to find a psychologist near you): 1-800-561-1223

Want to help support Mental Health Estrie? In recognition of Mental Illness Awareness Week, from October 7th to October 13th, pick up one medium pepperoni Pizza at any Dominos Sherbrooke location for \$5.00 plus tax (that's pick up, not delivery) and Dominos will donate \$2.00 of that to Mental Health Estrie.

One man's love for Potton's round barn



THE SCOOP

MABLE HASTINGS

For many in Potton, saving Mansonville's Round Barn, one of six in the Eastern Townships has been a labour of love and one of extreme pride

for a group of dedicated citizens. The plan is for the barn to become a major attraction in the Eastern Townships and one that will complement the area and contribute to its growth.

With three interior levels, the barn will showcase: a permanent exhibition on the history and heritage of the region as well as occasional thematic exhibitions as well as a multifunctional room for conferences, shows and receptions. The grounds will continue to showcase the public market with local produce and craftsmanship, an educational garden and children's activities, outdoor cinema, concerts etc...

For "Serge," a member of the

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