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Is Improved Mental Health On Your List of Resolutions for 2014?

January is always a great time to start anew! Since our calendar year is at the beginning of its cycle, it seems the most natural time for us to make improvements and try new things ourselves.

We make resolutions that often include improvements to our diet and physical health, focusing on our appearance and on what the outer world sees of us. Knowing this, advertisers bombard us with ads for weight loss, healthy eating, fitness equipment and gyms.

Worthy of note this year has been the increase in advertisements for mental health awareness, which include the “Depression Hurts” series, as well as advertisements for Alcoholics Anonymous, and Bell’s annual “Let’s Talk” campaign regarding depression. For those of us in professional fields related to mental and emotional health, this is particularly encouraging. Not only is this important message getting out to the public, but it is also being transmitted with a drive and energy previously unseen.

This increase in media presence supporting education and public awareness about conditions such as **depression, anxiety disorders** and **stress-related disorders**, serves to lessen the stigma around these conditions. As these educational messages become more widespread and are communicated consistently over the long term, people suffering will experience less shame and embarrassment, and will seek the help they need. This would certainly be an ideal outcome.

Increased media presence should also increase awareness that these conditions are far more commonplace than you might think. In fact, these conditions may be more the “norm” than one might expect.

A Few Mental Health Statistics to Consider:

- According to the Mental Health Association of Canada, 20% of Canadians will experience a mental illness in their lifetime.

- The Public Health Agency of Canada’s website states that anxiety disorders affect 12% of the population, causing mild to severe impairment. They also state that, “for a variety of reasons, many individuals may not seek treatment for their anxiety; they may consider the symptoms mild or normal, or the symptoms themselves may interfere with help-seeking.”
- This Agency also reports that approximately 8% of adults will experience major depression at some time in their lives, and that worldwide, major depression is the leading cause of years lived with disability, and the fourth cause of disability-adjusted life years (in other words, the time we “lose” from fully living our lives due to ill-health, disability or early death).
- A study done by the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) revealed that Canadians are amongst the world’s highest users of anti-depressants, with a reported 9% of the population using anti-depressant medication. This figure is the 3rd highest amongst the 23 developed countries surveyed in the study done by the OECD, with only Australia and Iceland being higher. This study also showed that the use of anti-depressants is on the rise (Study Reported in Huffington Post Canada Article, November 22, 2013).
- The Anxiety Disorder Association of Canada suggests that more than 4 million Canadians are diagnosed with some form of anxiety disorder annually, and that they are twice as likely to occur in women than in men. In fact, 30% of women will have some type of anxiety disorder during their lifetime.
- Canada is not alone in this: According to the Anxiety and Depression Association of America, anxiety disorders are the most common mental illness in the US, affecting 18% of the US population over 18 years of age.

The above statistics are based upon reported cases, and while the numbers may not appear very high, consider this: The statistics provided by the Public Health Agency of Canada, are based only upon cases which involve hospitalization. Their website also indicates that, in the case of anxiety disorders, hospitalized cases are down 49% since 1987. This implies that the number of individuals who seek community-based treatment is not tracked and can only be guessed at.

The more disturbing implication is that there are many more individuals, whose numbers are not reflected in these statistics, who are not seeking or receiving treatment at all. According to the Anxiety Disorder Association of America, of the estimated 40 million American adults with anxiety disorders, only about one-third of those suffering receive treatment, despite the fact that the disorders are highly treatable.

Why Does the Stigma Continue?

Despite efforts to increase awareness, fear of the stigma associated with psychological, emotional or mental difficulties continues to be the biggest barrier to individuals, couples and families, impeding them from getting the help or treatment they need. Borrowing from a twelve-step program quote, we are, indeed, “only as sick as our secrets,” and too many people continue to suffer alone and in silence because of the fear of how others will judge them.

As human beings, we tend to judge what we don’t understand. “Judgment” is simply making up your mind about what something is so that you can know how to relate to that something. Without understanding or experience of what a person may be going through, or without knowing how to help or how to ease another person’s difficulties, humans can easily judge, push away or ostracize others who are suffering.

In other words, we fear what we don’t understand, and we react in a way that protects us from our own fears. In our own minds, we can relate to those struggling with emotional or mental disorders as “wrong”, “bad” or “weak” – which are judgments that impair us from being able to see things otherwise. And while these are natural, defensive responses to dealing with situations outside of our capacity, when we buy into these judgments, we live in a perpetual state of fear – fear of those who are struggling, and fear of being in that state ourselves.

On the other side of this lens, the people who are struggling with disorders are typically unable to understand what is going on inside of them. They feel helpless to do anything about it, or to know how to fix it. They can judge themselves in the same way that they fear others do, and can distance themselves from others because of their own shame. Thus, the pattern of not getting help due to the fear of judgment, and the associated stigma, continues.

When our human tendency to judge is viewed from this perspective, it certainly makes the thoughts we think extremely powerful things, seemingly impossible to overcome! This, say in comparison to overcoming war, famine and pandemic diseases.

The Price of Prioritizing How We Look, Over How We Feel

Like it or not, there are some challenges in our lives that, if left unaddressed, simply do not disappear. Life throws us new challenges and situations that we have little understanding of, and our skills and abilities to navigate through these events do not manifest out of thin air. Our fears that surround having new experiences and going outside our comfort zone can easily lead to feelings of depression and anxiety. Particularly, when we find our normal way of operating is no longer effective and we must find new ways of doing things, but have no idea where to start. We have to take risks and try new behaviours; and that naturally means that we may look – and feel – awkward, out of control, incompetent or uncomfortable while doing so.

The desire to hold on to positive public image – whether it be the high-school “cool,” the “I’m in control and have it altogether” or the “super man/woman” façade – stems from the fear of

appearing weak and emotional. Ironically, by holding tightly to these idealized public images, we actually do make ourselves exactly those very things we wish to avoid appearing!

Holding on to these images weakens us by limiting our options and making solutions unavailable. It also weakens us as it keeps us locked in isolation, away from social contact and interaction where we can test out the reality of our fears, ask questions of others we trust, and observe and test out new ways of doing things. And, it makes us live in a self-protective, survival-based state where we are constantly reacting to, and from, fear. It makes us live from our emotional and instinctual brains, rather than from our place of higher awareness and ability.

It would seem that this is, in fact, the mental health issue we all really have to overcome. So I put it to you again: "Is improved mental health on your list of resolutions for 2014?"

How Can We Help Those We Care About?

Creating mental wellness and developing emotional self-awareness are both processes that involve learning new behaviours and changing old patterns. As such, they unfold and are not linear; nor are they accomplished according to a schedule.

We can dismiss those who are struggling because of our own feelings of inadequacy around helping or solving. When someone is struggling, it doesn't mean that they want you to solve their problems for them. Sometimes, they just want someone to listen so they can sort things out in their own mind.

Here are a few tips for helping those people you care about while developing new habits of relating along the way:

- Be aware of your own discomfort with difficult conversations or situations and how it can affect your behaviour (avoiding, dismissing, etc.). Be willing to inquire into someone's situation.
- Avoid the tendency to tell others what to do based upon what you think works for you. We are not all created the same, and one size does not fit all. Telling people what to do closes down conversations.
- Instead, ask if they have an idea of what kind of help they need. Make suggestions (e.g. did you consider...?) and expect the "ya, but" reactions you are likely to get. The point of this is not to solve their problems in the moment, but rather to open dialogue and create mental space for alternatives to be considered.
- Encourage them to take action in small steps (for example, "What one small thing can you do today that will move you in the direction you want to go in?").

- Recognize your own limits for helping and acknowledge them with the other person, and encourage them to seek professional help to better understand themselves and their emotions, and to learn new skills and approaches for managing emotions and handling challenging life situations.
- Remember, as well, that caring for people who are going through depression or anxiety can have its emotional impact too. So don't be afraid to seek the help you need as well.

When the support and understanding of a friend is not enough, I can help. As a professional Psychotherapist, I help individuals suffering from anxiety and depression to reduce their symptoms, while getting to the underlying issues that may be leading to their symptoms in the first place.

Please contact me for a consultation to see if you would benefit from psychotherapy.

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