

Mental health: Start talking to stop stigma

By Luke Hendry, The Intelligencer

Posted May 12, 2012

<http://www.intelligencer.ca/ArticleDisplay.aspx?e=3559970>

It's time to start talking.

As the national Mental Health Awareness Week campaign draws to a close, agencies are calling for open, frank and respectful discussion about mental illness.

Their approaches vary, but the message is the same: a lack of understanding is hurting both sufferers and society, and it must stop.

Some organizations are turning to elephants for help.

Yes, elephants: little, happy-looking, squishy toys intended to spark conversations about mental health.

Stigma the Blue Elephant is part of a four-year-old campaign by the Mood Disorders Society of Canada.

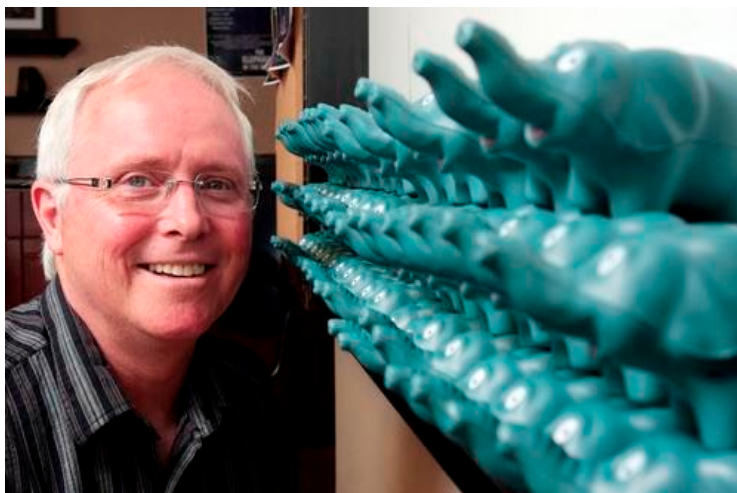
The idea is to break the ice on an often touchy subject by defusing the situation with something silly.

About 10,000 foam-rubber elephants and brochures have been distributed across Canada.

The palm-size toys are now being used by the Mental Health Support Network of South Eastern Ontario (MHSN).

Garry Laws, the Belleville-based MHSN's executive director, said the reaction has so far been "unbelievably" positive.

"For those of us with mental illness, one of the biggest things we need to know is: 'Is it safe to talk to you?'" Laws said.



Garry Laws, executive director of the Mental Health Support Network of South Eastern Ontario, displays herd of foam-rubber Stigma elephants at the network's office in Belleville, Ont. Thursday, May 10, 2012 in Belleville, Ont. The elephants are the creation of the Mood Disorders Society of Canada and are intended to help start discussions about mental illness. LUKE HENDRY/THE INTELLIGENCER/QMI AGENCY

“If you have this in your office, it’s a safe place.”

Local agencies say the lack of discussion means a lack of understanding. And that, they say, causes fear, more suffering, and high economic and social costs.

“Everyone needs to realize that the stigmas surrounding mental illness produce silence. In turn, this silence allows stigmas to grow unchallenged,” Douglas Mattis, co-chairman of the local Family Support Network, said Tuesday.

The group awarded three Loyalist College students certificates for writing “letters of hope” about reducing stigma.

Tara Williams said she learned to adjust her thinking. She’s just completed the community justice service worker program at Loyalist College.

Williams was one of three winners of the letter contest.

“You see someone; you judge them,” Williams said in an interview. “Remove that and realize you should never do it. It’s harmful.”

The contest’s other winners were Jessalyn Foley, of the college’s child and youth worker program, and Emily Bothusz of the social service worker program.

“There should be no shame ... no fear,” said Bothusz, adding she has a panic disorder caused by a chemical imbalance. “You are a person battling a ruthless disease.”

And if you’re talking about mental health, agencies say, it’s important to use the proper words.

The sector’s language has long been debated.

Cate Sutherland, executive director of the Addiction Centre for Hastings and Prince Edward Counties, said even those in the field have been trained recently.

“We needed to increase awareness about the pervasiveness of stigma,” she said.

Sutherland is an advisor for the Concurrent Disorder Capacity Project. The ongoing effort by a long list of partners is studying the region’s ability to treat people with concurrent disorders — those with both mental illness and substance abuse problems.

The South East Local Health Integration Network (LHIN), which oversees local care on behalf of Ontario’s health ministry, funded the training.

“There’s no training about stigma out there for mental health or addiction workers — so we developed our own.”

All 500 community-based (non-hospital) mental health and addiction workers in the LHIN region took the course.

The Addiction Centre is among those recommending the use of updated language to avoid stigma. The key, she said, is to describe others as humans first, not starting with their conditions.

“Labels are never a good thing,” Sutherland said. “They always have negative connotations.

Calling someone “a person with a drug problem” instead of “an addict” humanizes that person, she said.

“When they think of the word ‘addict,’ all kinds of pictures come to mind, and most of them are not true. They’re a person.”

Back at the Mental Health Support Network, Laws is hoping for a stampede of elephants — and plenty of healthy talk about mental illness.

“Stigma is critically important to the people with mental illness because it either slows down or prevents recovery,” Laws said.

A listening ear makes a big difference, he added.

“The evidence is there that peer support really works,” said Laws, noting it is non-clinical and non-judgmental.

Phil Upshall, executive director of the Mood Disorders Society, said 10 to 15 elephants and brochures are shipped weekly in exchange for \$30 donations made through the society’s website.

“We know it’s working because people talk to us about it; we see people talking about mental illness in a very non-judgmental and non-stigmatizing way,” he said.

Seeing an elephant means “you can talk about (mental health) issues without being told to shut up and being laughed at and told there’s nothing wrong with you,” he said.

Student Emily Bothusz, speaking at the Family Support Network event, urged the crowd to use their knowledge to fight stigma.

“We’ve informed you. We’ve educated you,” she said. “Now act.”

luke.hendry@sunmedia.ca