



MENTAL ILLNESS AWARENESS
WEEK: INTERVIEW WITH I/CAN
SOCIAL CARE ADVISOR MICHEÁL
O'ROURKE AND PEER SUPPORT
SPECIALST LINDSAY ANDERSON

Lindsey is a peer support specialist with St Michaels Hospital, Toronto. Her role is to support those in recovery from Mental Health and Substance Use Disorders based on her own professional and lived experience. Lindsey is a strong social advocate and is passionate about lending her voice to societies most vulnerable and marginalized populations.

People are uncomfortable with self-disclosure, and this is usually because of the perceived stigma. At the beginning, did you struggle at all with self disclosure and openness?

We have come to believe that individuals who self-disclose and acknowledge the hidden parts of themselves are somehow different from the rest of us. More courageous? Less fearful? The truth is, opening up about mental health, produces some uncomfortable and raw feelings. At the beginning of my recovery, it was and admittedly still is, difficult to share my truth. I feel like I leave myself open to the ridicule and rejection of others, and this is partly due to the stigma attached to mental illness.

Society teaches us to reject what we don't understand, and many believe that having a mental health issue, is a moral failing or a character flaw of some sort. Through my recovery I have learned that the process of self-disclosure is not supposed to offer comfort, and I have become "comfortable" with being "uncomfortable." I don't openly share my experiences with mental health and addiction for self-satisfaction; I share my story in the hope that I've given someone permission to wholeheartedly embrace their own issues.

The thoughts and feelings that often take place before and after self-disclosure are those of self-doubt and fear; "What will they think of me?", "What if they reject me?", take it from someone who knows, these are both normal. The one thing that has changed for me over time though, is the way I respond to this internal narrative. I've become less focused on external factors and more mindful of how I feel and who I can help because ultimately, that's what matters most.

You are now a strong and passionate social advocate for those with mental health and substance abuse issues. In your 'journey' to now (through both the good and bad times) how important was keeping 'social' and not isolating?

Social connections are a powerful component of our everyday lives as they hold an imperative role in our survival. In particular, our sense of belonging plays an important part in our over-all health. Many of the challenges I encountered were brought about by loneliness and isolation; I craved community and connection. This only became apparent when I sought professional help for my mental health and addiction problems.

Throughout my recovery, I learned the importance of establishing close connections with others and how to reach out and challenge myself in my worst moments of isolation. I sought solace in peer-based meetings, joined my local gym, signed up for a multitude of volunteer positions, attended community events and was welcomed into a loving, non-judgemental faith community.

Taking active responsibility for my wellness was essential, and as a result I am now in a completely different place - emotionally, socially and spiritually - from where I was seven years ago. Today, I have a strong support system and I have been given the opportunity to use my lived experience to help others. Being able to connect with individuals who struggle, just as I had, is a privilege and one of the most beautiful gifts of recovery.