Lived Experience Editorial

Living the Journey

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This journal reflects the journey from illness to recovery. The professional experience is important, but understanding a patient's first-hand experience living with mental illness and being in the forensic system provides additional perspective. As a university graduate who underwent psychosis with auditory and visual hallucinations, I have a desire to share my experience and journey through recovery.

There is no doubt that there exists stigma about mental illness. There needs to be a paradigm shift in the way society views mental illness to promote open discussion and transition back into society. It is healable if a patient breaks an arm; the progress and recovery can be measured. With mental illness it is more difficult to measure progress once the mind is broken and as such, society has difficulty viewing those with mental illness from a recovery standpoint. However, with modern medication and therapies it is possible to reach a high level of wellness. Mental health care is evolving and there has been a shift in the way treatment is being provided. I can speak to the effectiveness of the available therapies based on my own personal experiences. Medication has played a major role in my success and staying on my medication is incredibly important. Some patients stop taking medication after they start feeling better which causes their mental health to suffer and they may be readmitted for further treatment.

The mind is delicate and mental illness does not discriminate. When one is predisposed to mental illness such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, depression and anxiety, they may develop an array of symptoms and even full blown psychosis. Substance use intensifies these symptoms. The use of substances like alcohol or drugs plays a major role in the deterioration of many patients so that they eventually enter into the mental health system. Routine testing of patients for substances is done and this data is written in the patient record to ensure community safety and continued recovery. For many patients this is the revolving door of the forensic system. As patients’ overall wellness improves and their privilege level increases, they may find themselves in situations in which they are exposed to and even offered substances. The use of these substances can contribute to the patient becoming unwell and as such may be sent

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from a minimum security to higher security environment. Their privileges are revoked as a result and the cycle continues.

When one hears of the struggles I have overcome in the mental health system and the resiliency I have developed, people can then relate and this may give them hope. If there is light at the end of the tunnel one has something to hope for even if the light is very faint. I was looking at spending my life locked up in an institution but over the past six years, I’ve worked hard and progressed. I have now returned to the community with limitations, but have made significant progress and continue to work towards personal improvement. It is my hope that sharing my experience will help educate and enlighten readers about living with the stigma relating to mental illness.

The next issue of the journal looks at global perspectives of mental health recovery. Global perspectives enable people to understand the connections between their own lives and those of people throughout the world. This in turn can teach and enable us to understand what changes need to happen and whether we are heading in the right direction. As part of a new research project, Ontario Shores has implemented patient-led programs, a model that was borrowed from Great Britain and Australia. These programs help patients take control of their own lives, provide social opportunities and helps with engagement in personal wellbeing. I took advantage of these programs and facilitated my own running group and the personal rewards were plentiful.

Each issue of the journal will be associated with an important theme in recovery. I will contribute to each issue’s theme by providing a voice for those with lived experience by sharing my unique perspective. I will focus on my life in the mental health system, and identify some of the areas that have worked well and others that need improvements. I will talk about my experience living in a detention centre with mental health concerns, from my time at Ontario Shores to a future of living in the community. I will also discuss how patients spend their leisure time and how this can sometimes be problematic. Having a sense of autonomy is very important as a patient, and being in the mental health system requires you to be adaptable in order to achieve success. The journey of recovery can be a difficult one. Once I was finally allowed the opportunity to return to the community alone and plan overnight trips at my mother’s home, it was liberating and made me incredibly thankful for having made such progress. However, the stigma that those with mental illness face can be intimidating. When given the opportunity to re-enter the community after being in treatment for years, patients may feel at times lost. If one person reads this and they have a glimmer of hope then the message is worth sharing.