



## Mental health issues and career success

BY LEANNE FOURNIER

**W**orkplaces have evolved to a point where those experiencing mental illness are now more likely to tell others about it and seek help without the fear of repercussions in their careers.

It wasn't always this way. There was a time when the words career success and mental illness were rarely used in the same conversation. Employees with mental illness were often stigmatized to the point of being seen as unable to do their jobs or even worse, any job at all. Many were simply terminated during times of illness, while others felt they had no choice but to quit their jobs or go on long-term disability. Sadly, this still occurs in some workplaces.

The following stories however, show that people experiencing mental illness can continue to be successful at work when they are able to speak up and get the support they need. These stories also help others who may be struggling understand that they aren't alone.

**Rona Maynard, Speaker, Author, Mentor**



Peter Breago

In 1997, Rona Maynard was at the height of her career as Editor of *Chatelaine* magazine when she decided to tell her story of

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depression. The editorial was an introduction to an article *Chatelaine* was running about depression, which at the time was being described as a “women’s disease” and “the common cold of mental illness.”

“I told my story which was very tame by today’s standards,” Maynard said.

“There was no mention of crying on the kitchen floor causing no end of confusion for my child who asked his dad what’s wrong with mom. And my husband saying he didn’t know.”

Neither did she talk about her suicidal thoughts, the feeling of walking uphill through sand or how going to bed was the highlight of her day. When her depression was at its worst she was a self-employed writer working at home alone; so was able to hide.

After she sought treatment and began to recover, Maynard knew she wanted to do something that would use her gift of telling stories that reached people, eventually landing the job at *Chatelaine*. She was well into her recovery when she wrote the editorial that opened the floodgates for thousands of letters from readers who shared their own fears and struggles.

“There was a running theme in the responses that had to do with work,” Maynard said. “People feared that they’d be found out, that they’d lose their jobs or that they would find it difficult to do their jobs and wouldn’t be able to carry on.”

What was shocking to Maynard was the realization that many people who reached out to her had nowhere else to go. “Anyone could call me and they did.”

Back in the late 1990’s she said few were talking about their struggles with mental illness. “Margo Kidder and Margaret Trudeau were, but the discussion was all about stigma

and pretty much stopped there.”

Of her decision to disclose her history of mental illness to her readers, Maynard said, “I had this nagging sense of regret and loss for all the risks I didn’t take, the fun I didn’t have, and the family times that I couldn’t enjoy because I wasn’t really present,” she said. “So as I thought about my editor’s letter for that issue, it struck me that I could do something positive.” She wasn’t aware just how big that something would turn out to be and that she would be talking about it for a very long time.

As a storyteller, it’s not surprising that Maynard believes in the power of stories



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to help drive change. “Those articles in *Chatelaine* became the ‘mother’ of subsequent discussions,” she said. “Once we talked about depression, we could talk about the mental health of youth, the mental health needs of seniors and workplace mental health.”

“For every story that’s told, someone gets the idea, ‘Maybe I can tell mine.’”

Now retired from *Chatelaine*, Maynard is still enjoying career success as a published author, speaker, mentor and leader of storytelling workshops.

## Jan Wong, Journalist, Author, Professor



Jan Wong was a successful journalist, foreign correspondent and author when she experienced depression in 2006 while working for a major daily newspaper. That story begins when the response to an article she wrote, while covering the Dawson College shooting, included death threats and a subsequent breakdown in her relationship with her employer.

These were some of the factors that drove

her into severe depression, leaving her unable to write and ultimately, to do her job.

“I knew a lot about many things but I knew nothing about mental illness,” Wong said. As she continued to learn – and struggle – through the process of disability, return to work, arbitration and finally litigation, she said she found herself on two sides of the same story.

“I was the person going through it but also the journalist who was watching it all from the sidelines,” she said.

Wong was struck by how much of the experience of mental illness at work was “unreported” at the time.

She knew there could be risks with disclosing her mental illness as well as potential challenges in getting support from her employer, union, Employee Assistance Plan and medical practitioners. “The voice in my head was telling me if you write about this you will never work again,” she said. “But I had no choice. This was my next story and I had to write it. I couldn’t go on to the next thing until I did.”

And write it she did, after she left the newspaper and despite the stigma she had been exposed to.

“It was a terrible power struggle. Because of the stigma at the time, everyone seemed to think I would be too ashamed to speak up.” But she did speak up and in the end, she said, that’s what mattered.

You can read more about Wong’s story in *Out of the Blue: a Memoir of Workplace Depression, Recovery, Redemption and, Yes, Happiness*. She credits the support of her family for helping her find the courage to tell her story. “My husband and my sister kept saying ‘you’re right’, my dad supported me even though he was personally attacked for it, and my kids never said ‘just stop.’”

Wong, who has since fully recovered from

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her depression, has been able to move beyond the stigma she experienced to become an acclaimed professor in journalism at St. Thomas University, as well as to continue her work as a columnist and author. She is currently working on her fifth book about home cooking in France, Italy and China.

## Orlando Da Silva, Lawyer



After being appointed president of the Ontario Bar Association in 2014, Orlando Da Silva decided to share the story of his lifelong battle with depression and anxiety.

He chose that high profile time in his life to disclose because he had an audience he didn't think he "would ever have again": 16,000 association members – including lawyers, law students, and judges – many of whom have since shared their own struggles with mental health issues.

"I wanted my term as president to be meaningful and knew I had the ability to

influence the Ontario Bar Association policy and direction during my term," he said.

Da Silva said that at the time, his mental illness was a secret he kept from everyone, including most of his family. "I just felt it would help if I shared," he said. "And it felt like the right time."

Da Silva's mental illness began as a child but it was in his adult life – struggling through law school, a failed marriage, and a devastating loss as a candidate in the 2008 federal election – that he was pushed to the edge. He attempted suicide, reaching out for help at the last minute. He's grateful he got the support he needed and that he found the courage to move forward and continue on with a successful career, which brought him to a place where he could finally speak out.

"I felt safe in my career," he said. "I was known to be effective and had been practicing law for 21 years." Still, he recognized that, being in the public sector, there could be some consequences for telling the story. He decided that the benefits far outweighed the risks.

In considering his options, he also talked to the Chief of Psychiatry at Mount Sinai Hospital, who told him that one of the best ways to help someone with depression or mood disorders is to share one's own story. "This assures people that they don't have to suffer alone and that they can have a successful productive life notwithstanding the illness," said Da Silva. "That has continued to guide me."

He's been surprised by how many lawyers and professionals like him have told their story since he told his. "It's like they now have permission to talk about it and I find that especially gratifying," he said.

Da Silva now provides counsel to the Ontario Ministry of the Attorney General.

We have come a long way.

The road for many who are on the journey



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to recovery or living with mental illness is not always easy, as these stories show. Each of these accounts illustrates both how far society has come, but also how far we still need to go.

For Maynard it's that although a small number of senior executives "got it" several years ago, today we are seeing the need to reach all levels and sectors. She said, "This will help fewer people lose their careers as a result of mental illness."

Wong is happy to see that the conversation about mental illness at work is now much less taboo. "It's similar to how the conversations are evolving about other serious issues such as racism and sexual assault," she said. "People aren't as likely to trash the victims anymore

and it's the same for people with mental illness."

Da Silva is particularly proud that a task force has been struck by the Law Society to proactively address mental health among lawyers. "I never expected to see that in my lifetime," he said.

Maynard, Wong and Da Silva all experienced mental illness, chose to speak out, and were able to continue with successful careers. It may have been because they were accomplished and proven professionals with marketable and transferable skills. Possibly their wins were more due to the fact that they were able to adapt their work and lives to support their recovery and wellness.

What these stories tell us is that thanks to those that have found the courage to speak out, workplace stigma and discrimination as a whole are continuing to evolve.

But this evolution doesn't rest entirely on the words of people that have experienced mental illness. It is also in the conversations that are happening more and more amongst workplace leaders and stakeholders, union representatives, medical practitioners and society as a whole.

And in that, there's hope.

These are just some of the stories that will be highlighted in a book that will look at the evolution of workplace mental health, being released by the Great-West Life Centre for Mental Health in the Workplace and the Mental Health Commission of Canada in late 2017. ■

*Leanne Fournier is a freelance writer who specializes in writing about mental health and workplace issues.*



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