Stigma has always been an issue that most mental health professionals believe should be tackled. They have a common belief that the punishing result of the stigmatization of people with mental health issues comes from the lack of knowledge and understanding about mental health. However, severity of the issues faced in their everyday life, make it unclear whether the symptoms the person exhibits, the side effects of treatment or the stigma attached to the person labeled with a mental health problem creates the highest level of disability.

Contributors to this newsletter have tried to expose the roots of stigma by showing how our beliefs continue to feed, shape and give strength to the labels we shackle to people, causing great hardship and isolation for the person and an uncaring, often hostile environment that blames the person for our attitudes.

Waterloo Regional Branch and Wellington-Dufferin Branch have been struggling to establish a collective vision and mission statement that inspires as well as provides direction. We want to also capture what we believe is a core problem that often goes unnamed. We needed to state that bigotry and prejudice are beliefs that significantly impact whether the community accepts, for some of its citizens, the loss of rights, increased poverty, homelessness, unemployment and loneliness. As a result of our consultation process both Boards have approved the following statements.

**Our Vision:**
An inclusive community which promotes emotional well being, human dignity and social justice and where all people are valued and have equal opportunities to participate in all aspects of life.

**Our Mission:**
To work with the community to provide opportunities for all individuals to enhance their mental health and the quality of their lives and eliminate bigotry, prejudice and the resulting stigmas.

My belief is that the strength of these statements as well as the thoughtfully articulated articles in this newsletter will challenge all of us to examine our beliefs and the low and limited expectations we unconsciously impose upon people with mental health issues. Although it is difficult to recognize our own bigotry and prejudice (as often we see ourselves as champions of people who are disadvantaged), we need to closely look at how easily we accept a quality of life for people with mental health issues that we would not accept for ourselves or our families. Based on our perceived authority and control over people's lives, often our actions reinforce the stigma society holds, which as advocates for people disadvantaged, we state we are trying to eliminate. We have come a long way in changing our collective attitudes, but we still need to recognize that we have taken but a few steps on a long journey to an inclusive community.

by John Jones

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A Sister’s Story  
by Ronny Schedler

July 6th will probably be just another day for most people, but for me it will always be the anniversary of a turning point in my life. For reasons only known to him, my brother chose this day to end the lives of his family, and then took his own life.

My brother Bill Luft was a kind, caring and devoted family man who loved his wife and children very much. He taught his children about the wonders of our universe and taught them how to experience nature.

The media exploited my brother’s mental health issues with no regard for others who experience mental health difficulties. People started to understand the truth behind this tragedy. People actually started to feel some compassion for my brother. When it was all over, my brother’s mental health wasn’t the main issue, as some had tried to claim.

Since the tragedy, I have become very aware of the lack of knowledge people have about mental health. This surprised me because I believe we all experience mental health struggles at some point in our lives. I myself have suffered from several issues in the past year, experiencing reactions to intense stress, grief, depression and what they call post-traumatic stress disorder. I was very fortunate because I had an overwhelming amount of support from a very caring community I live in. I don’t know where I would be without that support and acceptance. Not all my experiences have been positive. I have also felt the stigma attached to this tragedy. I am the sister of Bill Luft and we share the same blood. Some people I know run from me in fear.

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The recommendations resulting from the inquest called for mental health education to remove the stigma attached to mental health problems. People started to understand the truth behind this tragedy. People actually started to feel some compassion for my brother. In some cases, it was all over, my brother’s mental health wasn’t the main issue, as some had tried to claim.

Since the tragedy, I have become very aware of the lack of knowledge people have about mental health. This surprised me because I believe we all experience mental health struggles at some point in our lives. I myself have suffered from several issues in the past year, experiencing reactions to intense stress, grief, depression and what they call post-traumatic stress disorder. I was very fortunate because I had an overwhelming amount of support from a very caring community I live in. I don’t know where I would be without that support and acceptance. Not all my experiences have been positive. I have also felt the stigma attached to this tragedy. I am the sister of Bill Luft and we share the same blood. Some people I know run from me in fear.

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I have always considered myself to be open minded and supportive when it came to my brother. The truth is I have learned more about his experiences in dealing with his mental health since his death than during the entire seventeen years he had been struggling. I can’t express how much this learned information has changed by life, my way of thinking and my compassion for people who suffer with mental health issues. I hope through my tragic experience I can help people understand the importance of education and acceptance. It took losing the lives of six family members for me to open my mind to find out what services are available for a person and their family.

There is a stigma that doesn’t need to be there. My mind is open and I want to share my experience, strength and hope to help remove the stigma.
A Mother’s Story
by Judith Rosenberg

It is possible for people who are dealing with serious mental health issues to soar above the struggle and stigma, to realize a life of dignity and accomplishment. This is the story of one such person, the family who loves him, and the community that supports him.

From the age of 18 my son began to encounter his demons. They kept him from completing his education in Fine Arts, and from following his dreams. For ten years he fought against what was finally to be diagnosed as Schizo-Affective Disorder. I, who had envisioned a glorious life for my only child, felt I had received a death sentence, as I watched him be slowly engulfed by psychosis. I read everything I could about the disease. I eavesdropped in stores and restaurants for a smattering of information. I knew nothing about where to go for help. I was drowning and there was no lifeline in sight.

Ultimately, it became necessary to restrain my son in a psychiatric facility where he was surrounded by other patients, beautiful young people, who believed they were everything from Cleopatra to Mohammed. They paced the halls in their agitated states, the lost sons and daughters of other parents, whose lives were being snatched away, and stolen from them. As I made the trip to visit my son each day, from Guelph to Toronto, and back again, I pleaded, begged, and cursed, and I demanded answers. It has taken three years and rivers of tears for the answers to come, and the journey has been inspiring.

My son’s healing began the day he came to Guelph, a community that opened its arms and took him in as one of its own. His life in the past had been fraught with daily experiences that contributed to elevated levels of stress, anxiety, and paranoia. Schools with no system to accommodate the students who needed to work in harmony with their own rhythm; psychiatric facilities that treated the symptoms, then released the patient into a cruel and unforgiving society; a system of policing people with serious mental health issues as though they were criminals; and media that sensationalized the confused acts of people suspended in psychosis.

In Guelph, we found a safe haven where my son’s medical needs were of paramount importance, and the first piece to be identified in his journey to wellness. Slowly and surely we built a team that would become our support system, and virtually our family for many years to come. The Homewood Health Centre, the Canadian Mental Health Association, the Community Mental Health Clinic, all continue to play major roles in my son’s life and mine. He was invited to participate in a research project at the Homewood, where the effects of a new drug were tested over the span of one year. The new medica-

A COMMUNITY THAT IS WILLING TO OPEN ITS ARMS

I am still the lioness protecting her cub from the ugliness of prejudice.
tion has enabled my son to experience increased capacity, and to enjoy an enriched quality of life.

Through the Employment Supports Program of the Ministry of Social Services, my son is engaged in upgrading his computer graphic skills, and is working toward a future goal of employment. CMHA is providing ongoing support in this area. Their caring and conscientious staff are ever available for input and discussion. CMHC and its Family Education Program, guides families in creating a healing environment for their family member. Fragmented families come together in groups, and leave the process whole again.

Through an outpouring of professional support, and personal friendship, my son is benefiting from the services in his community that he most needs. He has been stabilized on his medications for three years, has reclaimed critical pieces of himself, and has once again connected with his artistic spirit. He continues to paint, and touch others through his work, which is rich in colour and emotion. He is involved in an outreach program for high school students, where he and his peers share their experiences, in a move toward increasing awareness and encouraging early detection and intervention.

He has been honoured for his contributions by The Courage To Come Back Award Program, through the Centre For Addiction and Mental Health in Toronto, and the Award of Excellence, from the Mood Disorders Association in Toronto.

As for me, the direction of my life has taken a dramatic turn. After my initial feelings of anger, pain, resentment, and deep sorrow, I found myself more and more isolated from friends and family. No one understood, I felt, and I certainly didn't possess the will or the desire to enlighten them. In reality, we who support someone who is dealing with a serious mental health issue, have our own distinct society. We need to grieve, to rant, to cry, to accept, and finally, to celebrate, and we need to do it together. My son has taken me on the most exquisite journey imaginable, and through him I have come to know and work with exceptional people in the mental health community.

I now belong to the Schizophrenia Society, a group that has worked diligently for decades to dispel the myths and stigma of mental illness. I am also a member of a newly formed association, The Family Mental Health Network, comprised of family allies who recently lobbied successfully for an ACT team (Assertive Community Treatment), and is currently developing a guide book for families and individuals dealing with first episode psychosis. These are just two of the many groups of organized individuals who serve tirelessly to heighten awareness, raise funds, provide housing, offer emotional support, and rejoice in the accomplishments of those we know and love who are dealing with mental health issues.

This is a real story of one young man, one mother, and the journey we have made from a place of despair, to one of anticipating each new day. There are still obstacles to overcome, and battles to be fought. I am still the lioness protecting her cub from the ugliness of prejudice. But I can honestly say that the more we all speak out, and are willing to share our experiences openly, the more we see the barriers lifting. There are still many souls who need to be given the opportunity to thrive and flourish in a community that is willing to open its arms. The journey continues for all of us in this community, to become knowledgeable, to exhibit respect and concern, and to accept and celebrate the differences.
by Jessie Baynham

As a University of Guelph placement student with CMHA, I want to share my journey through the issue of language and mental health with you.

University students are programmed full of theories, models, diagnoses, disorders, and dysfunctions. Intuitively, for me this focus never seemed quite right. Having struggled with mental health issues myself, it felt wrong to be putting people in discrete boxes according to their "condition". I always knew this language was not helpful, but what other options were there?

When I started in September 2000 with CMHA in their Community Development and Education Service, I had no idea what I was getting into. This was to be my first real opportunity to start using those theories, models, diagnoses, disorders and dysfunctions - after all, I was going to be working in mental health! That was my first mistake. I quickly realized that this organization did not fit with the medical model of mental health services. I also learned that this organization did fit with me, and my beliefs.

Throughout my orientation it was made clear to me that language is an immensely important part of CMHA's values and principles of service. It made sense to me that we can not begin talking about community inclusion, acceptance and empowerment while we are defining people by their diagnoses. By referring to people in this way, we effectively strip them of their personal power. I was beginning to understand that compassion, empowerment, and acceptance were not options - they are essential ingredients in providing community based services.

One of the most important lessons I have learned at CMHA, is that each one of us at some point in our lives, will experience hardships. Challenges are a part of life, and nobody can escape that. Inevitably, the challenges that present themselves to us can compromise our well-being, including our mental health.

Having learned this valuable lesson, I have a new perspective on language and stigma, particularly with respect to mental health. I now understand that while it may save time to refer to someone as "the schizophrenic" or "the bipolar", it does not save dignity. So instead of denying the reality that we are all many things, all at one time - let us embrace and celebrate the fact that we are multifaceted beings. Let us not stigmatize individuals in our community simply because we are not willing to look at them as people - as complex and vulnerable as we are.

So, what's in a word? Identity...Power...Everything! Let's challenge ourselves, and our community to accept all people, despite their differences. Let's meet that challenge by changing our language and thus, our

So, what's in a word?

Identity....
Power....
Everything!
The following conversations resulted from a group of people coming together to share their personal experiences with stigma in the workplace. Despite their struggles, the group reflected a common hope for change.

Kim: Seems to me it’s ‘lip service’; that work places say it’s okay that someone is struggling with their mental health, and that they will have support ….but when it comes right down to it there is no support.

I have known people to “pretend” they have a physical problem and that’s why they’re away from work. For me, I ended up feeling isolated and alienated. For example, they ‘claim’ the company is downsizing, and that is why they have to let you go.

Richard: I have had to lie to get a job rather than admit to having a mental health problem. I perform well in the interview, I do well at my job, but then the “bad days” start to kick in and they don’t understand what happened to the guy they hired. Despite what people might think, I don’t want to jump on the “disability bandwagon”, I want a job! It’s not just about supporting myself financially; a job gives me a sense of self worth and personal value.

Ann: They made it so hard for me at work; I think they were trying to force me to quit. They just wanted to ‘get rid of me’, so they didn’t have to ‘deal with me’. In my work place, I know there were a number of people who were dealing with mental health issues. They encourage you to use the Employee Assistance Program, but god help you if you actually use it…then you become ‘labeled’, and they use it against you. What really got me was that I worked at a human service organization, and got no support. I decided to resign before more harm was done to me emotionally. I felt if I didn’t quit, they would wear me down. It felt so unfair! Because I have mental health issues does not make me incompetent to do my job!

They want you to be ‘part of the team’, but one of the ways I was trying to cope was focusing on doing my best in my job. I didn’t have anything left over to work on my interpersonal relationships with other co-workers, and I was judged negatively for that. I needed to prioritize my energy, but it was how I acted with other staff that was noticed, not that I was still doing my job well.

Kim: I felt betrayed. I thought that if I talked about my issues it would help. I had eight years of good performance reviews, I had a baby….I began to struggle….I didn’t have the right kind of support….everything just snowballed. They said I had ‘adjustment troubles’. I started to feel paranoid that they were out to ‘break me’. Instead of supporting and trying to be accommodating, they actually made things harder by switching all my work hours around. I didn’t know what my rights were as an employee, and I didn’t have the strength to stand up for myself.

Kim: I had an ally in my doctor; he said I didn’t have to tell my employer anything. I kept trusting and hoping my supervisor’s promise of support at work would happen. I had asked her to keep my confidence about beg for a chance to work. I have skills and I want to be appreciated for that. Right now, my pride is gone; I need a job that can help me build up my self-esteem and give me a feeling of being self-sufficient.

Ann: If you have a physical problem that people can see, there is no shame, but because mental health problems are invisible, somehow the perception is that it’s our fault, we are labeled in a negative way. As if we are choosing to struggle on purpose!

Kim: Silence hurts! If you keep it (your mental health issues) a secret because of feeling shame and guilt, it makes you feel more isolated and alone. I was told not to talk to anyone at work about what I was going through….so consequently I didn’t get a chance to have any natural support from others that may have wanted to understand what I was going through.

Mary: When I needed time off work for depression, I had an ally in the office and she told me to keep quiet, that “others won’t respect you….tell them you are needing time off work because of your knee injury”. She told me other staff might interpret my experience of depression as a character flaw. I didn’t share my real story until a year later when I was feeling better. When I wasn’t well, I didn’t have the strength to stand up for myself.

Richard: Mental health issues happen to anyone. It is beneath me to beg for a chance to work. I have skills and I want to be appreciated for that. Right now, my pride is gone; I need a job that can help me build up my self-esteem and give me a feeling of being self-sufficient.
what was going on with me....she broke that trust....she set me up and hung me out to dry. At one point, I thought that if I hurt myself physically then I could get time off work without having to admit my mental health issues.

Mary: Work places can be like an army that shoots its wounded.

Richard: I had a note from my psychiatrist that all I needed was one week off to sort out my medication. They jumped to conclusions....didn't even try to talk with me....I got a letter in the mail telling me that I was terminated. They treated me like a 'broken product' that you just discard if some small part isn't working the same as before. I was alone, I lost my friends at work because they were afraid and didn’t understand.

Kim: I am a fighter, but there is an emotional cost in having to deal with the stigma of being honest about my mental health. Employers set a standard... then they judge you by their standard... if you don’t measure up then you are out.

Richard: It seems like there is a black and white view out there.... your mental health is either 'okay', or you are so ill that you can’t function. If people felt safe enough to be honest, we would know all kinds of people who are carrying on with their life, and are getting the help they need at that particular time in their life. Our society doesn't acknowledge that mental health is not black and white, that it's a continuum that changes over the course of our lives.

Mary: When I don’t feel well, I need to feel secure that I can take the time I need, and not loose my job. I believe there are different issues and different needs that people have....not everyone is going to require the same things. Employers should not assume people will require the same support.
My Personal Reflections
By Paul Reeve

Have you noticed how much of a powerful impact labels can have on all our lives? They help to identify us and help others to understand a part of who we are. They can also have devastating effects.

Most of us define a large part of ourselves by our work and/or the various roles we occupy (parent, secretary, lawyer, cook, teacher, etc.). It’s usually one of the first topics to come up in a conversation when we meet someone. Using labels is a convenient way of communicating. They signify something important to us as we live our lives and fulfill our dreams and take pride in our efforts and accomplishments along the way.

The dark side are the labels we’re all familiar with that are given to people because of their race, ethnicity, culture, body structure, socioeconomic status, mental health status, gender, age, and the list goes on and on. A major issue is the stigma, prejudice and damage that accompanies these names. The National Stigma Clearinghouse has defined stigma as “a narrow set of beliefs that damages a broad, diverse group of individuals. As a basis for discrimination, stigma robs people of the opportunity to live, work, and thrive in the community”. Stigma is about disrespect and devaluing people.

I am involved in the area of mental health and names such as crazy, nuts, schizo, etc. have been around a long time and continue to be used in everyday situations. They are sustained by the images portrayed in the media and very often are associated with fear and the idea that “these people” are violent. And while the media is greatly responsible for perpetuating these myths, there is a need for all of us to educate ourselves as well as the general public to the reality.

Equally, if not more important, is how people with a label view themselves. Time and again I’ve seen people who were labeled “mentally ill”, “crippled”, or “disabled”, adopt the belief and begin acting as though they are the labels. They see themselves as flawed, not able, less than what they can be. They don’t think they are capable of holding a job or finishing school and give up. What follows are feelings of being hopeless, helpless, and useless. It is frustrating to see people with so much to offer, with so many gifts and talents, who limit themselves because they are so deeply affected by a diagnosis or label.

It is at the point when someone is struggling deeply with an unexpected change in their life that they can be most sensitive and vulnerable to suggestion and the negative influence of labels.

IF YOU HAVE BEEN GIVEN A LABEL, ASK YOURSELF

- Is your label your identity?
- Do you introduce yourself by saying what your diagnosis is? By identifying with the label (and the barriers they represent) you may not see your strengths and gifts and/or not seek your greater potential.
- Are you invested in your "diagnosis"? Do you think living this way is the only option you have?
- Do you focus on what is wrong?
- Have you established a focus for your life with set goals and identified barriers to overcome?
- Does adopting a label create an understanding and/or attitude of dependency in you?
- Do you see yourself as deficient, disabled, diseased?
For people who experience difficult life circumstances, I would challenge and encourage you to question the impact any label is having on you. Check out the facts and realities of your experience. Gain knowledge and understanding of your condition and take responsibility for your life.

I believe that everyone is worthy and capable of managing their life in a way that leads to a fulfilling existence. Being worthy means recognizing our value and the value of every person. Being capable of managing our life includes being able to ask for and receive help when we want it, and involving professionals to help us realize our goals and dreams. It is most important to be constructively critical in our thinking and evaluate the information taken in. Challenge current thinking and yourself. Explore and clarify anything you don’t understand.

This is a challenge to you to take responsibility for your life and not give it over to anyone else. Question whether your experience is an “illness” or something else. The medical model is one way to view/interpret your experience. Are there others? Therapies can help in many areas (spiritual, emotional, cognitive, behavioral, sexual) where a person lacks understanding and skills. This lack is often more related to our upbringing than any “illness”.

There is a host of scientific literature addressing the impact of labeling and stigma. One of the more noted authors is Erving Goffman who coined the phrase “spoiled identity”. There are many books suggesting different models and approaches to dealing with stigma.

There are many vehicles for you to learn, explore, and challenge: educate yourself (libraries, schools), join a self-help group, professionals, traditional practices, non-traditional/alternative practices, political activism, etc.

I hope these ideas will be discussed and debated because that can lead to a better understanding and more respectful relations. Words are a powerful tool and critical to expressing concepts and beliefs that lead to better understanding. Whatever the meaning, most important is that all of us use words that are respectful of the person and communicate accurate and useful information that is free of prejudice.

The idea is that you don’t have to have a significant health problem to be affected by the power of words - we can all look to how we use language and the impact it has.

Remember “NORMAL” is only a setting on a dryer. So let’s all honour and celebrate our uniqueness and

Use the “S.T.O.P.” criteria to help recognize your beliefs and actions, as well as those of others, that perpetuate stigma towards people who experience mental health issues.

It’s easy - just ask yourself if what you hear or say:

- **S**tereotypes people negatively?
- **T**rivializes or belittles people?
- **O**ppresses people through domination
- **P**atronizes people by treating them as if they were not as good as others?
You finally decide to get help...and then it seems like you’re punished for it—shamed, labeled and discriminated against.

That scenario could be true for anyone; national statistics estimate that one in three people will at some time in their life experience a significant mental health issue. Not to mention how many more lives are touched because we are a friend, co-worker or family member. Mental health is an important part of everyone’s life; no one is immune from circumstances that impact on our mental health.

Historically, people with mental health issues have often felt shunned by family, friends, employers and the wider community. Although there have been changes toward more support and inclusion, the public still fears what it doesn’t understand.

The stigma associated with a person’s mental health can take many forms: the written word, the spoken word, a person’s attitude or behaviour, and even physical violence. Whatever the situation, it causes people to withdraw, preventing early recognition of struggles, and making it difficult to get the help someone may need. Families also experience the effects of stigma, which leads to feelings of guilt and worry over what others may think. Studies have shown that Canadians felt the impact of stigma was the main barrier to seeking help. It can even be more difficult to live with than the experience of the mental health issue itself.

Together each of us can help promote a community that acknowledges the value and unique contributions of every citizen, regardless of what mental health issues they may face.

A welcoming community responds to the needs of all people, recognizes everyone has the right to equal opportunities, and the freedom to become a part of their community in every way that matters to them. It doesn’t have to be complicated... people need a place they can call home, something meaningful to do, a sense of contributing their skills to their community, and someone to care about.

We all have those basic needs. Our struggles may be different at different times in our life---but one thing is certain we need one another—we need a sense of community to enhance the quality of all our lives.

While the importance of treatment and support services for mental health is vital, people cannot build a life around them. We all need to feel included as part of our community so that we are able to develop natural, informal connections with those who can help us get through the daily challenges we all face.

Inclusion is about moving beyond services, beyond relating to people in terms of their difficulties. We must challenge ourselves to shift our view from seeing some as a "client", or "case", and see people as they deserve to be seen - as a community citizen. A citizen not defined by deficiencies but rather celebrated for their individual capacities. To embrace inclusion, a community needs to accept diversity and demonstrate tolerance.
We can recognize that a label or diagnosis tells us little about what to expect from the person with that label. It does not tell us about their capacity for friendship or creativity or accomplishments. It does not tell us clearly about his or her specific struggles or potential for recovery.

We can learn more about mental health and the issues that affect our mental health. The better informed we are the better we are able to resist the inaccurate and negative stereotypes that are so common.

We can listen to people who have experienced a mental health issue. They are in the best position to tell us how it is affecting their lives.

We can respond to stigmatizing material that portrays people with mental health issues in negative ways. Write a letter to the editor, TV sponsor or movie producer.

We can speak up when someone tells a joke that ridicules, or makes disrespectful comments, we can let them know that this is hurtful and that we find such comments offensive and harmful.

We can watch our own use of language. Many of us, without intending harm, use terms and expressions that actually perpetuate stigma. We may use a generic label that actually isolates people as a separate identified group such as “the mentally ill”, referring to individuals as their medical diagnosis (a “schizophrenic”), or using a psychiatric diagnosis as a metaphor for other situations. This is not only stigmatizing but inaccurate.

We can talk openly about mental health issues. The more our struggles remain hidden, the more people believe it is shameful and needs to be concealed. Letting others see people with significant mental health issues who are resourceful, articulate, creative, and who are familiar to us as valued friends or co-workers, is a powerful way to fight stigma.

And most of all, we can put people first...we can emphasize a person’s abilities, not their limita-
For More Information/Support, Call or Visit the Centre for Mental Health nearest you:

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67 King Street E
Kitchener, ON N2G 2K4
Ph: (519) 744-2049

Guelph
147 Wyndham Street N
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76 Stanley Street
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