

FAMILY CONNECTIONS

Supporting families as they care for a loved one living with a mental health challenge



Welcome to Family Support

BY DANA BENSON & COLLEEN WATSON

Welcome to the first edition of Family Connections, a quarterly newsletter for families supporting a loved one living with a mental health challenge. We are excited for this opportunity to share resources, feature inspiring stories of challenge, hope and recovery, and offer tips and tools for caregivers who support a loved one.

The journey toward recovery and wellness seldom follows a straight and easy path. There are curves in the road, fallen trees and boulders to navigate, sometimes the trail is flooded after a heavy storm. Sometimes it feels like the whole path goes uphill, and we can't see what's ahead because there is too much fog. Sometimes we stumble and need someone to help us up. And sometimes we catch a glimpse of the light glimmering through the trees, we feel the gentle breeze of healing on our upturned faces, our feet are sure and strong, and we look ahead with hope.

Caring for a loved one who is living with a mental illness can feel overwhelming at times. We are all somewhere along this path of wellness - some closer to the beginning of supporting a loved one coping with mental illness, and others a little further along the road to recovery. As we travel together, we can offer each other hope and courage, strategies for dealing with stress and navigating the mental health system, and a safe space to share our stories, knowing that we are not alone.

If you have a supportive story to tell or a perspective to share, we want to hear it! let us know and we will include it in the Your Voice section.

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Your Voice >>>

In future editions of the newsletter, we would like to feature **YOUR** voice! Do you have an experience to share or a story to tell about supporting a loved one living with a mental health challenge?

What has worked well for you with respect to managing a crisis? If the journey has been long, how have you grown, changed and adapted? How can your story help support and inspire others who are facing similar challenges?

Share YOUR voice; it will strengthen others!

Email Dana Benson for more info or to submit your story: dbenson@gbhs.on.ca

By Rupi Kaur

when the world comes crashing at your feet
it's okay to let others
help pick up the pieces
if we're present to take part in your happiness
when your circumstances are great
we are more than capable
of sharing your pain

Podcasts and More >>>

In addition to sharing your stories and experiences, we would also like to feature resources that you have found helpful: books, websites, podcasts, etc...

For example, the latest edition of [The Family Voice](#) (click to go to there), a family support newsletter published by the Centre for Mental Health and Addiction, features 2 podcasts which were reviewed by family supporters:

[Psychologists Off the Clock](#), with Dr. Debbie Sorensen, Dr. Diana Hill, Dr. Yael Schonbrun, and Dr. Jill Stoddard

[The Skillful Podcast](#), Bay Area DBT & Couples Counseling Center.

Both are available **free** on Apple podcasts and Spotify.

If you would like to listen to some episodes and provide a review for others, let us know.

And don't forget to check out the book reviews on pages 5-6 of this newsletter.

Self Care: Cultivating a Growth Mindset >>>

BY DANA BENSON

We have all heard the phrase: *it's better to thrive than survive*. Surviving is about merely continuing to live or exist. Thriving is about growing, prospering, and flourishing.

Thriving is a choice, not something that just happens to you or something that depends on external circumstances. Thriving is about intentionally cultivating a healthy and effective attitude toward the whole of one's life.

But, how do we be more intentional about thriving, especially when our lives are already so overwhelming as we

support a loved one within a system that may not work very well?

How do we keep ourselves from getting mired the mud?

How do we protect ourselves, our relationships, and our lives from being consumed by negativity and helplessness?

We cultivate the things that lead to renewed life and healthy growth.

Make no mistake, as any gardener knows, cultivation is hard work. Whether is it done the old-fashioned way with hand plows and horses, or with machines and state-of-the-art equipment, if you cultivate properly, you're going to get your hands dirty.

Transforming our perspective, learning to develop, articulate, and enforce healthy boundaries, and being mindful of our thoughts, emotions, and behaviours doesn't just happen. It takes work and practice.

Over the next few editions of this newsletter, I will highlights some of the things we can cultivate so that we can start thriving in the midst of the challenges we face.



First crop - Cultivate a Growth Mindset.

Cultivating a Growth Mindset

As we learn to take control of our own thoughts, feelings, and behaviours in the context of an inadequate system of supports for mental health wellness, cultivating a growth mindset is essential.

A growth mindset is rooted in the belief that we are capable of developing our talents, skills, and abilities rather than just being stuck with what we have.

A growth mindset embraces challenges as opportunities to learn, change, grow, develop, and progress. People with a growth mindset are more interested in learning and growing than they are about looking smart or silly or about failure.

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Growth Mindset continued>>>

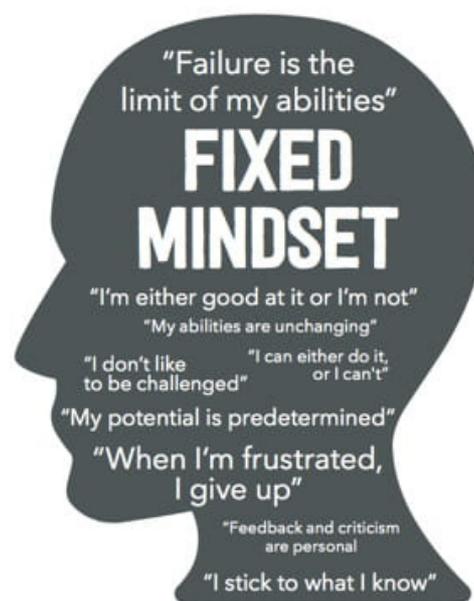
Being flexible in our thinking is a key part of cultivating a growth mindset. If something we try doesn't work one way, flexible thinkers look for other solutions and strategies rather than quitting or complaining.

Flexible thinkers are able to adapt their thought processes when they receive new information or when the context changes.

Flexible thinking is about learning to think about something in a new or different way and it involves patience, empathy, and the suspension of judgment.

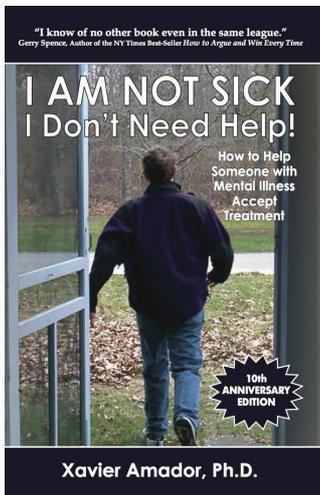
Some of the practical things we can do to cultivate a growth mindset include:

- learn to see challenges as opportunities
- be willing to try new approaches even if they make you uncomfortable
- reflect on aspects of your day that didn't go well and develop strategies to face those challenges differently next time
- seek out opportunities to learn something new
- ask for constructive feedback from a trusted friend or colleague
- practice mindfulness
- reflect on your purpose and how what you do and think align with it
- reframe difficult conversations as opportunities to gain new information



© Big Change

What's on Your Bookshelf?



I AM NOT SICK I Don't Need Help!

Xavier Amador Ph.D.

Reviewed by Bruce Edington, March 2022.

This is a 249-page self-help book designed for people who have a loved one suffering from a serious mental health condition (schizophrenia, bipolar, schizoaffective disorder any other condition in which the person has impaired awareness of their condition, called anosognosia) and the severe loneliness that accompanies it. It explains the difference between anosognosia and denial or lack of insight.

The book gives evidence that maintaining a strong relationship with our loved one is the most important factor determining their health, and preventing death from their illness.

The author develops a case for an approach that decreases conflict and fosters a supportive relationship.

He proposes a system of communication which he calls LEAP that stands for Listen, Empathize, Agree, and Partner. I will summarize these below.

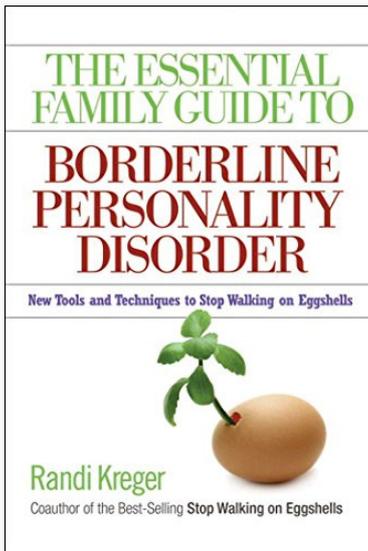
Listen: The author gives guidelines on how to listen with curiosity and respect to the issues, feelings, thoughts that our loved one is experiencing and how to allow our loved one to talk in a safe environment in which we stop pushing our agenda. He shows us how to identify our fears and find and agree on workable solutions to the problems our loved one is encountering. He shows us how to apologize for our differing points of view and to acknowledge our weaknesses.

Empathize: Dr. Amador shows us how to empathize with our loved one about their issues and how to give our opinion at the right time in a non-confrontational way.

Agree: The author teaches us how to look for windows of opportunity in which we can agree with our loved one without forfeiting our own opinions.

Partner: Dr. Amador helps us partner with our loved one to work on goals that we both would like to reach (i.e., staying out of hospital, off street drugs, not involved with the police).

This book's principles can be applied to many other relationships in our lives. It has helped my wife and I develop and maintain a good relationship with our loved one who has a serious mental health condition. It has also helped in our marital relationship so that we have a framework for interacting with our loved one that we can both agree on.



The Essential Family Guide to Borderline Personality Disorder

by Randi Kreger

Reviewed by Colleen Watson, March 2022

This book is for Family Members who have loved ones struggling with Borderline Personality Disorder (and/or traits). It is also extremely helpful for anyone who is supporting a loved one with a serious mental illness or emotional regulatory issues.

For some, they will appreciate the thoroughness of the book but also the humanity and authenticity the author provides the reader.

Tools, and outline of communication strategies to have effective conversations with loved one's struggling is key to this books appeal.

An easy layout that you will no doubt find useful, entertaining but most importantly freeing, as you learn, apply, and move beyond walking on eggshells to an understanding of essential Family skills to coping with a loved one's struggle with this mental health challenge.

1202

n. the tipping point when your brain becomes so overwhelmed with tasks you need to do, you feel too guilty to put anything off until later, prioritizing every little thing at the top of the list, leaving you immobilized.

During the lunar descent of Apollo 11, the "1202" alarm sounded just before landing, indicating that the computer was receiving more data than it could process. Pronounced "twelve oh two".

from The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows. John Koenig. Simon & Schuster, 2021.



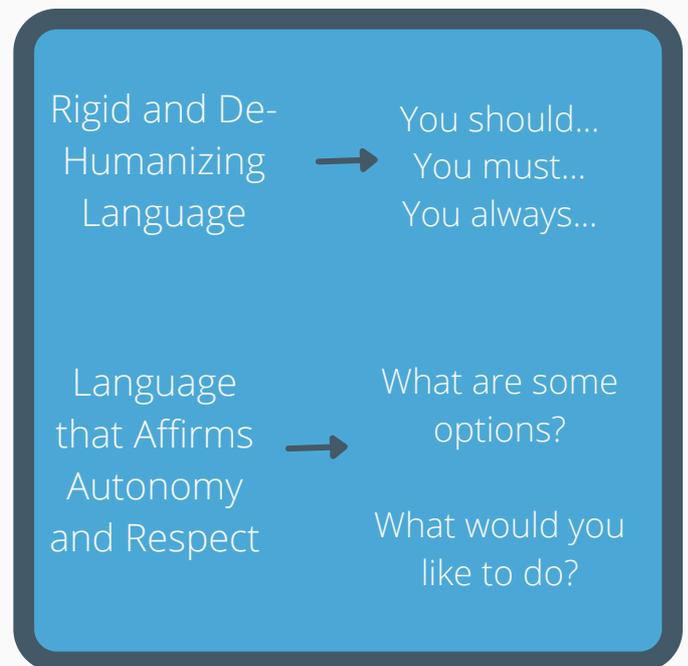
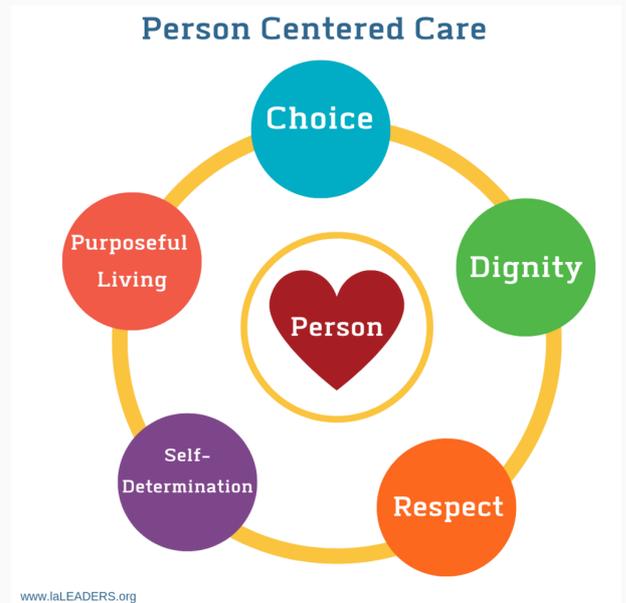
Language Matters >>>

by Dana Benson

Language is one of the greatest gifts we have. With words, we can express love, meaning, information, direction, and compassion. We can give and take instructions, get work done efficiently, and communicate needs and desires. Through poetry and prose we can create meaning that resonates in a place inside of us that has no words. Words have the power to heal and to harm, to inspire and to break apart, to impart power and to render someone powerless. The words (and tone of voice) we use communicate volumes about what we believe, our worldview, our judgments, and our biases.

As people who support a loved one living with a mental illness or addiction, it is essential that the language we use communicates dignity, respect, compassion, empathy, self-determination, understanding, and hope. We want to ensure that what we say and how we say it puts the person we are talking with at the centre of our conversation, honouring and affirming their humanity, rather than reducing them to a diagnosis or behaviour.

When talking about health, wellness, illness, and recovery, sometimes the language we use can do more harm than we realize. The simple difference between the words 'wellness' and 'illness' says something about our perspective. As we shift our communication away from illness driven language to a more person-centred perspective, we can build stronger relationships and inspire and empower hopeful recovery.



Language and tone communicate what we believe about the other person's ability and capacity.

For example:

Incapable:

*I believe you can do this, **but...***

*You are strong and capable, **but...***

The word 'but' always negates what just came before it.

Capable:

I believe you can do this. How can I support you?

You are strong and capable. I know you can succeed at this. I am concerned about...

What are some examples of things you say to your loved one about: making choices you don't agree with, pursuing a life path you think is unwise, or repeatedly making the same mistakes?

Does your language reflect your belief in their autonomy, capacity, and/or responsibility?

Language and tone also communicate what we believe about personal responsibility

For example:

That's a really bad decision. You need to be making better choices.

This statement communicates that we don't really believe the other person is being responsible and undermines their right to self-determination

Saying it differently can let the other person know that we believe they are capable of making good choices and are responsible for both the good and the poor ones.

For example:

How do you think that choice will effect/effects this particular area of your life?

Is there a different choice you could make to get an outcome more in line with what you really want?

ESOTERIC + ISOLATE

ESOTERILATE

| ,esə'terilāt |

v. (in a group) to exclude one or more persons from the conversation by talking about something little known or understood.

from: The E-Mo-Tion-Ary: A Dictionary of Words that Don't Exist for Feelings That Do by Eden Sher and Julia Wertz. Penguin Random House. 2016, p.72

Concurrent Disorders >>>

Concurrent Disorders = people who have co-occurring substance use and mental health challenges

Having a substance use problem or a mental health challenge significantly increases the risk of having the other, and there have been many studies which try to determine what the causal relationship might be between substance use and mental illness. Both may be triggered by a common factor, they may influence each other, or they may be entirely unrelated.

People with severe mental illness who also have substance use problems tend to experience a wide range of serious problems.

Supporting someone with a Concurrent Disorder?

The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) has developed an excellent resource for helping families as they support a loved one who lives with a concurrent disorder. You can find the guide here:
<https://www.camh.ca/-/media/files/guides-and-publications/partnering-with-families-guide.pdf>

Common issues include:

- more severe psychiatric symptoms, such as depression and hallucinations
- more dramatic effects after using substances, including more blackouts
- a greater chance of not following treatment plans
- physical health problems
- increased experiences of stigma
- financial problems
- housing instability and homelessness
- poorer management of personal affairs
- serious relationship problems with family members
- more verbal hostility, tendency to argue, disruptive behaviour, aggression
- violence or crises that may end up involving the police
- a greater likelihood of ending up in jail
- increased suicidal feelings and behaviours

From the Family Guide to Concurrent Disorders, CAMH

Our Favourite Wellness Tools >>>

- snuggle the dog, spend time with pets
- put your feet up for 5 minutes
- practice breathing
- do a 10 minute meditation app
- laugh out loud
- swim, run, walk to the corner
- smile at a child or a new mother
- rub cream on your hands
- write a haiku
- have a cup of tea and sit down to drink it
- find the Big Dipper
- nibble a square of good quality chocolate
- purging a space and repurposing it for something else



What's a Cognitive Bias?

A cognitive bias is a systemic error in thinking that occurs when we process and interpret the world around us.

There are many types of cognitive bias (thinking errors). For this issue...

We all know that our experiences of the world, our relationships, how we respond in moments of crises and where we find rest and peace are all informed by our thinking patterns - by insight and our perspective.

One of the most valuable tools we have available to us in everyday life and especially when we are overwhelmed and stressed is to become more aware of our perspective.

In each issue of the newsletter, this section will offer some tips, strategies, or brain nudgers to help us become more mindful of our thinking patterns and the way they shape our interpretation of events around us.

In this issue - Beware the Cognitive Bias.

Fundamental Attribution Error

You judge others on their character, but yourself on the situation.

Usually this results in us making judgments about other people while making excuses for ourselves.

But, it's not only kind to view others' perspectives with charity, it's more objective too.

Try to be mindful to err on the side of taking personal responsibility rather than justifying and blaming.

yourbias.is/fundamental-attribution-error

For more information on this and other thinking errors check out yourbias.is

Mental Health Word Fun!

Unscramble the Words!

RPECETS _____

TEYAPMH _____

RHTOWG _____

TURST _____

YCROEVER _____

ENLSLWES _____

ECAHELLGN _____

PNEOSR TREENDC _____

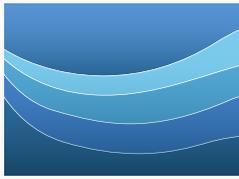
ESLF AOTTNIMDNEREI _____

EOPH _____

Family Support Groups >>>

Family Support Groups are a great way to connect with a peer support worker and other families who know what it's like to support a loved one who lives with a mental illness.

Together we offer mutual encouragement, tips and strategies for coping with crises, and wellness tools so we can be healthy enough to provide the best support we can.



RIDING THE WAVE
Family Peer support for parents supporting their adult children who are living with a mental health challenge
by Zoom Fridays 10:00-11:30am
email cwatson@cmhagb.org to register



BRIDGES FAMILY SUPPORT GROUP
Support for hospital crisis and transitioning from hospital to community
by Zoom Tuesdays @ 6:30pm
email dbenson@gbhs.on.ca to register



Women's Circle
Women supporting women in mental health and wellness
by Zoom Friday afternoons 2:00-3:30pm
email cwatson@cmhagb.org to register

Community Support Highlight >>>

Ok, so it's not really local, but the Centre for Mental Health and Addiction in Toronto has **FANTASTIC** mental health resources for both patients and families - courses on just about any mental health topic you can imagine, special family support courses on the impact of addiction and psychosis on families, and a host of other helpful resources.



Check them out:
<https://www.camh.ca/en/your-care/families>

Get Connected >>>

Family Peer Support is offered through the Canadian Mental Health Association in Grey Bruce and Grey Bruce Health Services, and can be accessed both in the community and in the hospital.



In our next issue: Colleen's feature on Mood Disorders

Other Connections and Resources

CMHA Grey Bruce: Peer and Family Support, mental health counselling, addiction supports, housing and community outreach. 519-371-3642

<https://greybruce.cmha.ca/>

Recovery Colleges: Recovery Colleges offer a number of free courses, webinars, workshops, and events to help those living with mental illness and their supports gain new skills and connect with community. For a listing of recovery colleges and the programs they offer, check out: <https://cmha.ca/what-we-do/national-programs/recovery-colleges/>

Mental Health and the Law in Ontario: This is a helpful guide to how the Mental Health Act works in Ontario and what that means for you and your loved one. Click on the link, or Google Mental Health and the Law in Ontario.

[https://www.oha.com/Legislative%20and%20Legal%20Issues%20Documents1/OHA_Mental%20Health%20and%20the%20Law%20Toolkit%20-%20Revised%20\(2016\).pdf](https://www.oha.com/Legislative%20and%20Legal%20Issues%20Documents1/OHA_Mental%20Health%20and%20the%20Law%20Toolkit%20-%20Revised%20(2016).pdf)

