

FAMILY CONNECTIONS

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



Telling your story >>>

BY DANA BENSON

Have you ever lost your voice? Have you ever found it difficult to talk about a challenging experience you had? Has feeling like you had to keep silent ever left you feeling isolated or alone? Learning how to tell your story, or parts of your story, is an important part of building resilience and affirming who you are and what you are about. Story-telling can reduce feelings of isolation and loneliness, and can be an important part of belonging in a mutually supportive community.

In the context of supporting a loved one who lives with a mental health challenge, reflecting on our experiences can help us identify our own growth and learning and can be an important part of encouraging others in their journey.

Over the last 15 years, I have supported someone who lives with mental health and addiction challenges. It has taken time for me to be able to share parts of my story with others: the frustrations, struggles, and stress, as well as the opportunities there have been for growth and resilience. Sometimes it has felt that things were 'back to normal', and other times I have felt as though I was drowning in despair. At several points along the way, 'hope' was a word I couldn't even think. Many times I have had to lean on others for strength.

Right now, I feel confident, strong, and flexible. I feel more alive with who I am as a person than I ever have, and I know that whatever tomorrow (or next week, or next year) brings, I can greet whatever comes with courage and wisdom. Right now, I feel like I have found my voice and I am living fully into my own story. 'Right now' might not last very long, but sometimes 'right now' is all we have, so it's good enough.

Whatever your 'right now' is, know that you are not alone in the midst of it. There are others who have been where you are. And there are others who can come alongside you as you begin to tell the story of what 'right now' looks like for you.

Have you got a story to tell that might encourage someone else? Let us know so we can share it with others!

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Self Care & Wellness Part 2 >>> Cultivating the Present Path

BY DANA BENSON

In our last newsletter, we began a conversation about intentionally cultivating healthy and effective attitudes toward the whole of one's life. Paying attention to our thoughts, attitudes, responses, emotions, perspectives, and behaviours can help set us on a road where we are able to thrive in any given circumstance rather than merely survive the challenging events we may find ourselves faced with.

Giving thoughtful attention to our thinking and behavior patterns doesn't always come naturally to us. We live in a society that values superficial interaction with ourselves and others, instant gratification, and quick fixes to challenges. We aren't very good at sitting with discomfort and our culture does everything it can to offer up solutions to numb, cover up, avoid, or escape from learning to cope with those difficult emotions and situations that we all face in our everyday lives.

This is especially difficult for those of us who support a loved one who is struggling with their mental health. As we care for others, we may feel overwhelmed with a whole range of emotions: fear, anger, disappointment, confusion, frustration, powerlessness, etc.

And when we are feeling this way, it can be very challenging to look after our own wellness. Tending to our own inner life can give us the strength we need to support our loved ones while still thriving in our own lives. Yes – it is possible!

But, as I mentioned in Part 1 of this series on self-care and wellness, it takes hard work and practice to transform our perspective and develop healthy and mindful behaviours, thoughts, and emotions.

Now on to **Part 2: Cultivating the Path of the Present**

When it comes to mental health, recovery, wellness, and our own personal growth, seldom is the experience about a particular destination. The reality is that we have no control over what is up ahead. We don't know what will happen and what won't happen and we don't know where we will end up. And, if we hang our own wellness on everything working out the way it should (which we can't control), we are just setting ourselves up for frustration, anger, feelings of futility and disappointment.

When we are mindfully present in each moment of our lives, we find that the stressfulness and anxiety about the unknown

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Cultivating the Present

Path

future recedes into the background and we are able to experience a certain sense of freedom and calm with whatever might be happening around us in that particular moment.

Cultivating this path of the present (and of **being** present) also isn't about constantly looking back on the path we have already travelled. Sometimes we can get ourselves stuck in a loop of telling and retelling our story of what has happened to us or to someone we love.

But when we constantly look back on our past stories, we risk getting stuck on things that we have no control over. Nothing we do in the present or in the

future will change what has happened in the past. At some point, we have to learn from the past and then free ourselves from its hold on us and re-focus our attention on to where we are in the present moment and how we want to take the next step along the way.

We can't control where we will end up or how we got to where we are, but we **can** control how we get to wherever we are going. We get to decide how we show up in any particular moment.

Cultivating the present path while being fully present is about learning to pay attention to what's happening right now in our surroundings and being able to weed out and prune away the things that don't matter at just that time.

Several weeks ago I was out walking the dog in one of our beautiful local wild places and I was thinking about how I could be more 'present' in the moment. How could I stop anticipating (and worrying about) what might be next in my life and instead embrace the

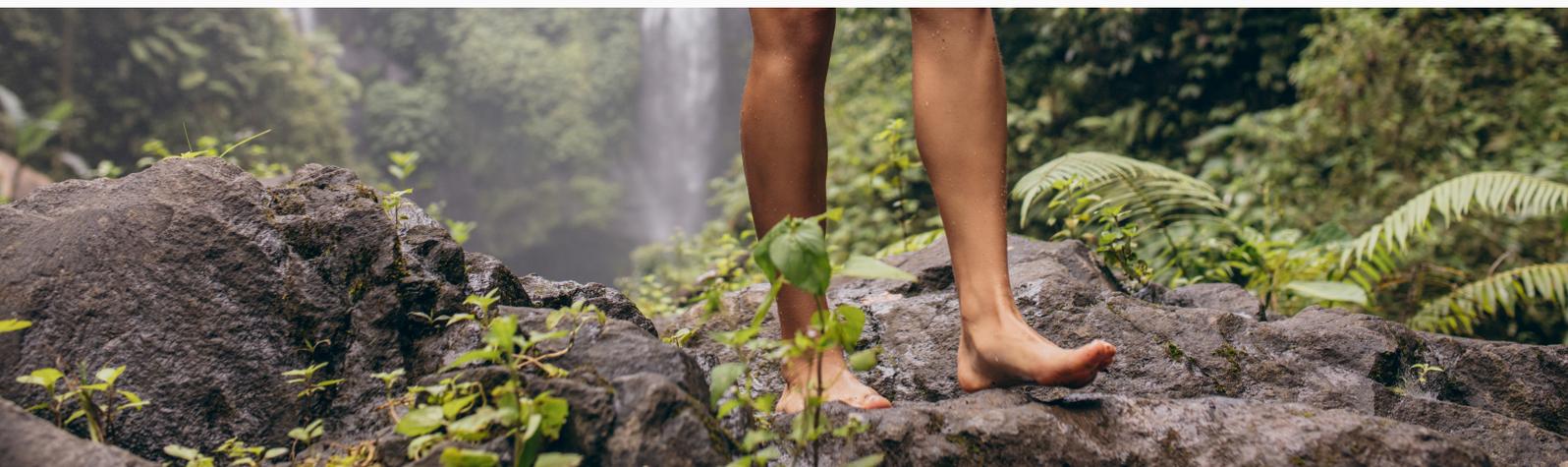
freedom of each step as a step of being 'in the now' rather than as just something that would lead to the next step, and

the next step, and the next step and eventually back to my car.

How could I immerse myself in the beauty of each present moment and absorb all the goodness of it without thinking too far ahead or ruminating on the past. How could I experience the peacefulness and calm of just being – without tasks to complete, people to look after, decisions to make.

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"The only thing that is ultimately real about your journey is the step that you are taking at this moment. That's all there ever is." Eckhart Tolle



Cultivating the Present Path

So, I did something I haven't done in a very long time. I took off my shoes and went barefoot.

When you are barefoot you have to walk differently than you would otherwise. You have to be more mindful of your step so you don't stub your toe or step on something sharp. You have to set your feet more gently and more consciously, with an awareness of each step.

As soon as I took that first barefoot step, the world around me slowed down. My body felt lighter on the earth. My awareness of my surroundings and my place in them intensified. I could feel that I was a part of something bigger than myself and my own challenges. My own concerns became more subdued and I felt enveloped in beauty and contentment. I slowly inhaled the clean breeze and moist earth. I became aware of the air softly brushing my skin. I felt the sun-warmed moss, cool damp rocks, soft leaves and pine needles, scratching acorn husks, and silky mud that covered the earth as supple skin encases muscle and bone. Each step and each breath a deliberate way of being in **This. One. Moment.**

Eventually I had to put my shoes back on as the gravel back at the car was a little sharp for my liking. But I emerged from the woods that day a different person than when I went in. This experience forced me to slow down, to observe more than myself, to be more deliberate, to appreciate each moment as something good and beautiful just because it was. Out of that experience, I remembered some things I had forgotten and I gained some new perspective. Here is a little of what I learned.

I can choose where I step. How I decide to show up for each step along the way is an expression of my own power and agency. When it comes to our own wellness as we cope with the challenges of supporting a loved one living with a mental illness, learning to respect the limitations of control and the power of agency is a vital piece of our own wellness. We need to identify and choose to do the things that we are actually able to do and that help us feel well and that give us hope: meaningful relationships, engagement with our community, a sense of purpose in our life and work, adequate sleep and healthy eating habits.

I can't control what is coming down the path ahead of me, what I might meet along the way, or what I have already left behind. It's important to prune the pathway of the things that are not within our control: other people's thoughts and behaviours, the adequacy of the systems we work within, everything about the past, every possibility for the future, etc.

I can control how I will greet whatever comes along the way: with skepticism or cynicism, or with an open heart, strength, and courage

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Cultivating the Present Path

The act of noticing transforms perspective.

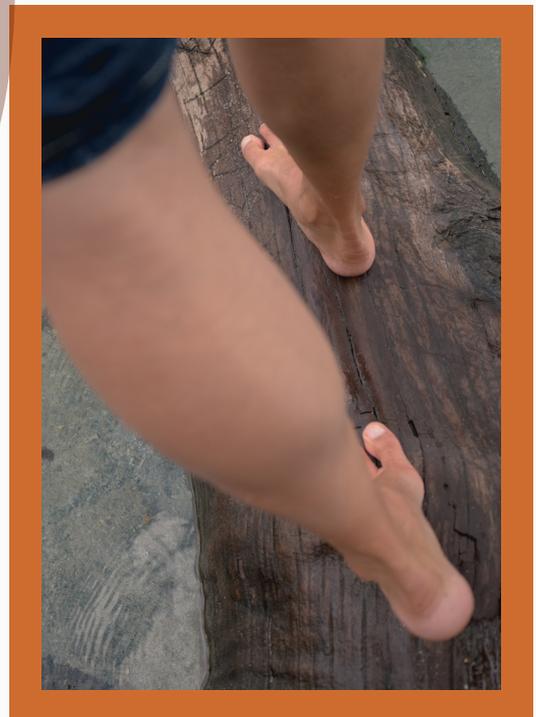
Sometimes when we are overwhelmed in the tasks of supporting a loved one and looking after ourselves as well, we can find ourselves ignoring, invalidating, or pushing away our own thoughts and feelings because we don't have the energy to deal with them. But we all know what happens when we do this – those things grow and get louder and heavier until finally we are crushed under their weight. When we notice what is around us, how we are feeling, what thoughts we are having, we mindfully acknowledge their existence and affirm their validity.

One of the remarkable things about noticing, naming, affirming, and validating what is happening both outside and inside of us, is that these things somehow lose their paralyzing and debilitating power over us and aren't so scary or overwhelming anymore. And, even better, when we begin to pay attention, we notice wonderfully delightful things we may have overlooked or walked right past.

So, what does the present path look like for you? What do you notice about your surroundings? What do you notice about what is going on inside of you? Who else might be walking alongside you? What about your present journey is in your control and what can you let go of? What is beautiful? What is hard?

I am not alone on this path and it has been well-travelled before.

The reality is that none of us is travelling through the unexplored bush all by ourselves with only a dull machete in hand. While our experiences are unique to us, they are similar enough to what others are going through to be able to find connection and encouragement along the way. When we meet up with others who have been through something comparable, we gain perspective and new-found hope. We know that if we stumble or trip, there is someone around who can help us up. And, depending on where we happen to be along the way, we will very likely find ourselves encouraging someone else on their journey, or helping them to their feet.

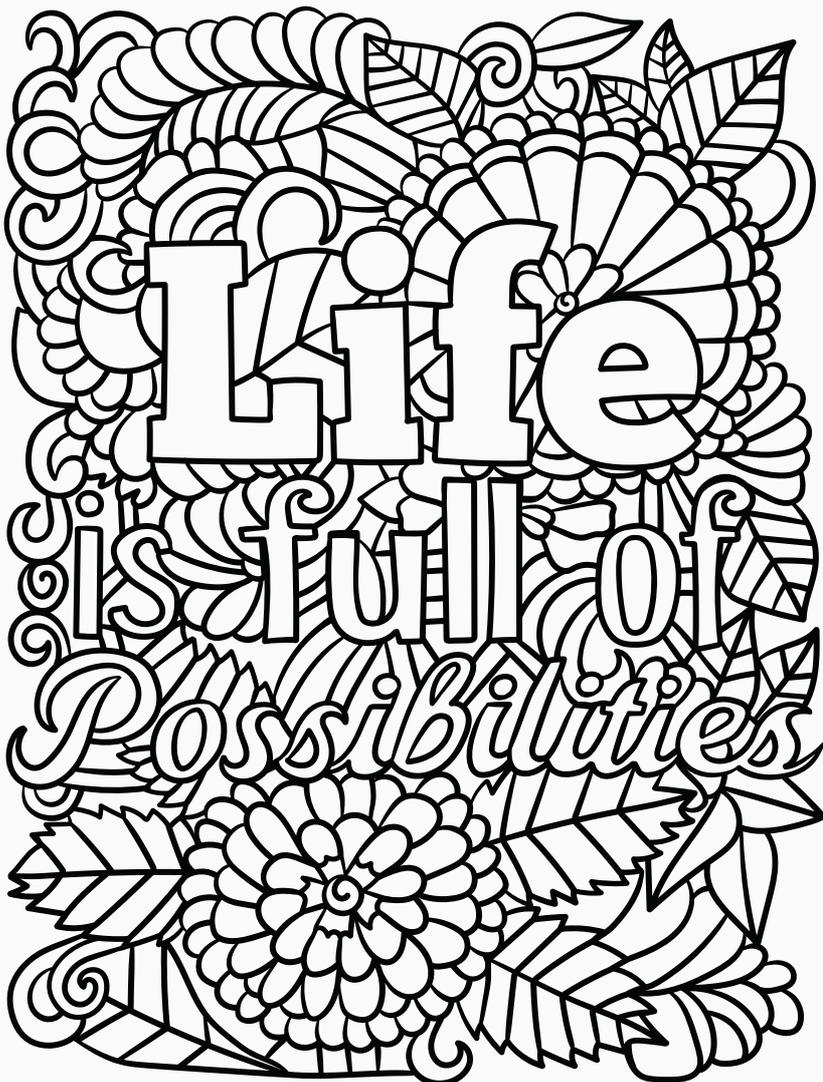


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Cultivating the Present Path

As you continue on your journey, try to stay present and to notice and affirm what **is**. When you find yourself spinning around to focus on where you have been, look down at your feet and notice where you are. When you find yourself straining your eyes to see what is up ahead in the distance, instead close your eyes and consider what is happening right now.

Listen to what your body and your mind and spirit are telling you - that rock/experience hurts, that bird/encounter sounds playful, these flowers/relationships are beautiful. Slow down and pay attention. Wherever we are going, we'll get there - one slow, deliberate, mindful, beautiful step at a time!



*Life is what happens when you
are busy making plans*

John Lennon

Summer Wellness Tools

Get dirty - dig in the dirt, pull up the weeds, plant some flowers.

Meditate - if you have never meditated, give it a try. There are several apps to help get you started. Check out [Calm](#) and [Headspace](#) for some ideas.

Move - get your body moving in a new way. Try yoga, go for a hike, stretch in your favourite chair. Notice how your moving your body improves your mood.

Listen to the birds - sit quietly on your porch, by the water, or in the woods and listen to the birds. How many different bird calls can you hear?

Eat the Rainbow - try to eat something from every colour of the rainbow every day.

Visit a local market - get to know your community, check out fresh local foods and handmade goods.

Check out an Audiobook - not a reader? Check out free audiobooks from your local library or get a subscription to an audiobook app.

Cultivate your imagination - read more, tell stories, daydream, be curious, entertain weird ideas, spend time with creative people, try something new

Summer Learning

Everybody needs a few good books or podcasts to dig into over the the summer. For some of us, summer is the time when we escape into the realm of mystery novels or 'bonnet dramas' (as my mother likes to call them). For others, digging into something a little more meaty is a summer highlight. Whatever your preference, here are some great options around mental health, providing support for loved ones, self-care, and finding meaning in the midst of challenge.

Podcasts >>>

[Hard Beautiful Journey: Addiction Support, Addiction Awareness, Addiction Recovery](#)

From the website: *Finding Hope Through Your Loved One's Addiction*

Do you have a loved one who struggles with addiction? Do you struggle with feelings of inadequacy in providing help for your loved one's addiction? Are you always in panic mode or on high alert wondering if they are ok? Is your #1 wish to wake up and still have your loved one alive? Do you neglect your own self-care because you put your loved one's needs in front of your own? Are you wondering if others are succeeding in helping their loved ones through this difficult journey?

...If you are ready to connect with others and find hope while navigating your loved one's addiction, get those earbuds in because it's time to get started.

[Addiction and the Family](#)

From the website: *Addiction and the Family is a podcast by and for family members of anyone with an addiction. We are working to bring experience, strength, and realistic hope so that you and your family can find recovery together.*

[The Happiness Lab](#)

This is a fun podcast that is a great 'pick me up' when life is tough. Full of inspiring stories that stem from adversity and challenge, the podcast presents a wide range of topics including everything from guilt, burnout, embracing sadness, the paradox of grief, anxiety, negative emotions, kindness, and change.

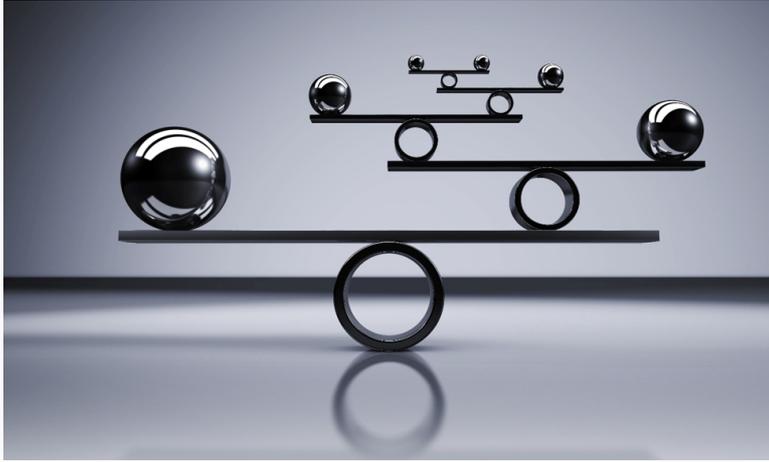
From the website: *You might think more money, a better job, or Instagram-worthy vacations would make you happy. You're dead wrong. In "The Happiness Lab" podcast, Yale professor Dr Laurie Santos will take you through the latest scientific research and share some surprising and inspiring stories that will forever alter the way you think about happiness. She's changed the lives of thousands of people through her class "Psychology and the Good Life," and she'll change yours, too.*

Books >>>

[Untethered Soul by Michael Singer](#) [Book & Card Deck](#)

From the website: *What would it be like to free yourself from limitations and soar beyond your boundaries? What can you do each day to discover inner peace and serenity?*

...By tapping into traditions of meditation and mindfulness, author and spiritual teacher Michael A. Singer shows how the development of consciousness can enable us all to dwell in the present moment and let go of painful thoughts and memories that keep us from achieving happiness and self-realization.



Mood disorders are a specific group of mental illnesses that effect how we think and feel about ourselves and perceive our environment and life in general. Of course, everyone has moods when we are either excited, happy, ecstatic, sad, unhappy, angry, or elated.

And sometimes, a person can get 'stuck' on sad, or experience extreme mood fluctuations.

When this happens, it can affect our lives in challenging ways.

Mood Regulation

We all need to be taught; yes, *taught* emotional regulation. We know from the research that inability to regulate emotion can be caused by several key elements in addition to an inconsistency in emotional regulatory lessons when younger. Some of these elements include:

- A situation, circumstance, series of events that have occurred during the learning process of emotional regulation or stimuli which would have normally contributed to the development of emotional regulatory skills was interrupted, not completed, or nonexistent.
- Early experiences shape how we view our world around us.
- We are pre-dispositioned to perceptions that either stem from genetics, and / or the environment or both.

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What do we know about Mood Disorders

- Mood regulation is different for everyone and can often feel confusing (Mood Disorders Association of Ontario, 2022).
- Statistically, mood disorders are common (Statistics Canada, 2021) Approx. 12% of the total population will have had a diagnosed Mood Disorder in their lifetime.
- Mood Disorders present differently in everyone. No two individuals who have the same diagnosis have identical symptoms or presentation. This is what contributes to the difficulties in diagnostics.

Types of Mood Disorders

A graphic featuring a hand holding a brain. The brain is depicted with neural connections. Overlaid on the brain are the following text labels: Depression, Anxiety, Bipolar Disorder, Dysthymic Disorder/Persistent Depressive Disorder.

Depression
Anxiety
Bipolar Disorder
Dysthymic Disorder/Persistent Depressive Disorder

Supporting a loved one who lives with a mood disorder

- Remember: it's not your fault - you didn't cause your loved one to have a mood disorder, and you can't cure it. But you can cope!
- Detach with love - Allow your loved one to take ownership of their moods. Our loved ones are responsible for their own responses (emotions) brought up by perceptions, events, or communication with others. As are we!
- Listen- Listen actively to *understand* and hear another's perspective. Support and affirm how someone is feeling. You don't need to "agree" with them - they know their feelings best!
- Be authentic. If you are concerned let your loved one know. If you are afraid, say so.

Being diagnosed with a Mood Disorder is frightening but can also be a relief for some who may have struggled for a long time and now have an answer.

- ASK your loved one how they feel.
- RESPECT their answer, whatever the circumstance.



Kindness, Love and Acceptance goes farther than anything else. People may not remember what you said, but they often do not forget how you made them FEEL

Maya Angelou

For more specific information and statistical information for Canadians, please review these resources:

<https://moordisorders.ca/fact-sheets>

http://images.pearsonclinical.com/images/assets/basc-3/basc3resources/DSM5_DiagnosticCriteria_PersistentDepressiveDisorder.pdf

<https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/bipolar-disorders/what-are-bipolar-disorders>

<https://moordisorders.ca/guide/guide-to-helping-someone-with-a-mood-disorder>

<https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.books.9780890425596>
(American Psychiatric Association, 2013)

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Angelou, M. (n.d.). *Maya Angelou Quote*. Unknown.

Mood Disorders Association of Ontario. (2022, 03 24). *Mood disorders association of Ontario Guides*. Retrieved from Mood Disorders Association of Ontario: <https://moordisorders.ca/guide/guide-to-helping-someone-with-a-mood-disorder>

Statistics Canada. (2021, 09 08). *Mood disorders by age in Canada*. doi:<https://doi.org/10.25318/1310009601-eng>



Tips, strategies, and brain nudgers to help us become more mindful of our thinking patterns and the way they shape our interpretation of events around us.

Thinking Errors

Adapted from Psychology Today: 10 Thinking Errors that will Crush your Mental Strength

Mental strength requires that we manage our thoughts effectively, regulate our emotions, and behave productively regardless of the circumstances we may find ourselves in. Often, when we are faced with a crisis or an acute challenge, irrational thoughts can send us spiraling uncontrollably into fear, anxiety, and a sense of helplessness.

When we are able to recognize this pattern, we can start to replace inaccurate thoughts with ones that contribute to a more positive sense of wellness.

One pattern of inaccurate thinking is catastrophizing.

Catastrophizing

Sometimes we think things are much worse than they actually are. If you fall short on meeting your financial goals one month you may think, "I'm going to end up bankrupt," or "I'll never have enough money to retire," even though there's no evidence that the situation is nearly that dire. It can be easy to get swept up into catastrophizing a situation once your thoughts become negative. When you begin predicting doom and gloom, remind yourself that there are many other potential outcomes.

Accept No Shade

by Donna Ashworth

Not everyone will like you.

Not everyone will agree with the things you say or do.

Not everyone will understand why you are who you are, which trials and tribulations made you stronger, weaker, braver.

Not everyone will care enough to look beneath, peek behind, Or read between.

That's ok. Some people will.

Some people will find you so fascinating that they will delve right into your depths.

Some people will devour your words and commit them to memory, should they ever need to revisit them again in times of pain.

Some people will crave your company like a flower craves the rain. Some people will not only appreciate your light, but they will reflect it right back.

They will charge you from the soul, like being plugged into the sun.

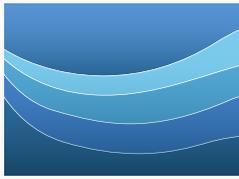
Those are your people. Accept no shade from haters my friend, life brings enough of that.

Always seek out the light.

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
email dbenson@gbhs.on.ca to register



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

Some of our support groups have a revised schedule over the summer. Please get in touch for more information.

Community Support Highlight >>>

Grey Bruce Health Services provides a number of mental health and substance use community programs throughout Grey and Bruce Counties. Our outpatient mental health services include case management, counselling, and walk in mental health support clinics. Our walk in clinics provide assistance in system navigation and service connection as well as single session brief counselling.



Our outpatient addiction services include Rapid Access Addiction Medicine (RAAM) and our Community Addiction Treatment Services day treatment service.

For a full listing and programs please visit <https://www.gbhs.on.ca/mental-health-addiction-services/>

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 Community:

Colleen Watson
cwatson@cmhagb.org

In Hospital:

Dana Benson
dbenson@gbhs.on.ca

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)

