



April, 2009

Supporting Students: A Promising Practice By Heather Soberman, MA

Inside this Issue...

Supporting Students: A Promising Practice: 1 - 2

Involving Non-Researchers in the Research Process: 3 - 4

The SEEI Corner: 4

“Without this program, I never would have graduated”

“Without this program, I never would have graduated” acknowledges John Taylor, a recent graduate of York University, previous participant in the Psychiatric Disabilities Program (PDP), and coordinator of the Program’s peer mentoring service.

Innovative programming

Housed in the counseling centre at York University, the PDP is considered innovative and comprehensive in its approach to providing support and advocacy for students with lived experience. The brainchild of Dr. Harold Minden, former chair of the counseling department in the early 90’s, the idea was later put into practice by Dr. Enid Weiner, who for the first ten years was the only staff member affiliated with the program. To accommodate the rising number of students, the program has since expanded and now includes five full time staff members and many more volunteers and peer workers. In Enid’s

opinion, this expansion is indicative of both a growing need, and an increased acceptance of the program at the University which encourages students to disclose their status so they can receive the supports they need.

Enid describes the program’s approach as unique as it considers the learning needs of each individual, and focuses on the *‘nature of disability rather than the isolated diagnosis’*. As the university experience can be stressful in itself, students who are trying to cope with symptoms of mental illness (sometimes for the first time) may become overwhelmed. Staff essentially act as brokers to hook students up with appropriate counselling, academic and social services, and advocate on the students behalf to ensure their rights are considered. Some of these services include academic tutors and bursaries to help cover support services outside of the university.

Who is OMHAKEN?

OMHAKEN is the Ontario Mental Health and Addictions Knowledge Exchange Network. OMHAKEN is designed to reach the varied constituents of Ontario who have an interest in health systems research, their conclusions, and any resulting system changes. It uses a “network of networks” approach, which capitalizes on existing mental health and addiction-related networks around the province. The network fosters interaction between stakeholders and researchers in research activities and, in the promotion, understanding, and application of evidence for program and system improvement.

OMHAKEN is supported by the Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-term Care.

OMHAKEN is on the [web!](#)



... Leveling the Playing Field *continued*

Peer support through the Peer Mentorship Program is another important component of the PDP, and provides emotional and social support for students. Mentors – upper level students who are enrolled in the program themselves – introduce participating students to the different program services, although eventually this partnership becomes like a buddy system. Mentors are not forced to disclose their specific status, but those who do find it extremely rewarding. As John describes, *“when you share your own experiences, it makes the student feel less exposed, and they will be more likely to confide in you – and making a difference in their lives feels great!”*. He adds that connecting with another student can be empowering, as you are using your own experience and insight to help someone through what might be a difficult time in their life. John admits that years back when he attended York, he was too proud to ask for help, and ended up leaving. Some years later, after entering treatment, he was determined to try again. And according to him, the

program's supports were integral to his graduating. In particular, he highlights the support of those in the program as most important to his success: *“my first few years at York, I hadn't made any close friends and the people who I met in the program made me feel connected to the university; it made me feel that there were people who I was accountable to”*. His best advice to new students is, *“be proactive and communicate early on with professors, and they are likely to be cooperative”*. Now having successfully completed an undergraduate degree in Psychology, he plans to apply for graduate studies.

Leveling the Playing Field

Enid holds that, *“Supports should not be considered an advantage, but as levelling the playing field.”* While she also believes that societal stigma accompanied by the, *“lack of attention and funding given to psychiatric illness compared to other disabilities”* is a challenge, she acknowledges the great progress made since the

outset of this program. There is however a need for more research to further develop similar programs, and to identify what kinds of educational supports work best for students experiencing challenges with mental illness. Further, Enid feels that increased awareness and acceptance is needed both at the University and societal levels to continue to bring this hidden disability out of the shadows.

For further information, contact: Dr. Enid Weiner, Coordinator of the Psychiatric Disabilities Program

Tel: 416.736.5297

Email: eweiner@yorku.ca

John Taylor, Coordinator of the Peer Mentorship Program

Email: johnnybill25@yahoo.ca

Psychiatric Disabilities Program website:

www.yorku.ca/cdc/pdp

Heather Soberman works as a Consulting and Knowledge Exchange Specialist with the Health Systems Research and Consulting Unit at CAMH. She can be reached via email:

heather_soberman@camh.net

“Supports should not be considered an advantage, but as levelling the playing field.”



Involving Non-Researchers in the Research Process:

Dr. Carolyn Dewa, Principal Investigator for one of the Systems Enhancement Evaluation Initiative (SEEI) studies, knows first-hand that employing individuals with a range of different life experiences to interview clients for research has many benefits. In her recent three-year Matryoshka Study, which looked at clients experiences of continuity of care in newly-enhanced early intervention and court support programs, she hired students, seniors, and consumer/survivors to conduct the interviews. Not only did each interviewer bring something unique to the interview process, they gained new skills and insights into mental illness and addictions.

The role the interviewers played was essential to the project: the conclusions of the Matryoshka Study are, for the most part, based on the extensive amounts of information that interviewers collected.

Having interviewers who are already trained, based in the local community, and who can be called on in future is also a valuable resource for local communities should they wish to conduct further research.

To assist interviewers in preparing for the interview process, to ensure consistency in approach, and

to help dispel any myths about mental illness and addictions, all interviewers took part in an intensive training session. The training was led by Dr. Elizabeth Lin, a Research Scientist with the Health Systems Research and Consulting Unit at CAMH, who also provides interview training for Statistics Canada. Each year of the project involved roughly 40 interviewers. Carolyn comments, *“[The interviewers] helped us improve the training material ...and their feedback was incorporated into the training manual for subsequent trainings.”*

Roughly 25% of the interviewers continued working with the project each year. This was helpful as they were experienced, knew the study, and could help to alleviate the anxiety that new people might feel about the kinds of clients they would be interviewing.

Three interviewers, Linda Stewardson, Freda Karioja and Michael Falikowski, recently shared their experiences working as research interviewers.

Linda Stewardson believes that her own recovery from mental illness helped make her a better interviewer. *“[When] I started interviewing and could feel [client’s]...stiffness about not wanting to share personal information – right away [I] would say that I’ve*

recovered from mental illness” Sharing her struggles helped clients to relax and open up more easily. She also discovered that her personal experiences helped her to better understand and empathize with clients.

Doing the interviews required Linda to maintain a careful balance between accurately recording what clients were telling her without making assumptions based on her own recovery and volunteer work, sticking to the prescribed process, and yet still responding to client’s stories of extreme isolation, homelessness and poverty in a sensitive way. It was difficult at times not to become personally involved and to keep the boundaries: *“I really believed in the project and those programs – at the same time, it was tough to gather information from clients where the issues are so real and so much a part of their life.”*

Through the interviews, Linda became increasingly knowledgeable about CMHA’s court support and early intervention programs, and more aware of the extent of homelessness in the region, the lack of specific kinds of services, and the barriers that people sometimes face to getting services. This has assisted Linda in her role as a board member with CMHA Thunder Bay.



“I ... could feel [client’s]...stiffness about not wanting to share personal information – right away [I] would say that I’ve recovered from mental illness”

... Involving Non-Researchers *continued*

Michael Falikowski, a University of Toronto student, describes the two week-end, 32 hour training that all interviewers received as, "...real hands-on, in your face." It was excellent preparation for the real-world scenarios that he encountered, remarking, "[It was the] best training I've ever had for any job, also the most challenging job I've ever had." Linda also thought the training was beneficial: "...I hated it but it was good. I was so shy and I hated having to do those [role playing] exercises but it was good to the point of being able to do the interviews."

Freda Karioja, a retired teacher, found that her understanding of mental illness and addictions and its impact on clients and families increased as she conducted interviews over the three years of the

project. Her interviewing experiences caused her to reflect on how easy it is for teachers to assume that a child acting out in class has behavioral problems, when perhaps it's a sign that the student is mentally ill. Similarly, by interviewing clients who had varying experiences with the legal system, Michael developed a deeper sense of empathy and appreciation for the daily struggles they face. One of Michael's first interviews took place at the home of a client, in a Toronto boarding house for men living with schizophrenia. Michael was shocked to see how squalid the conditions were. "It made me think that if you weren't suffering from some mental illness prior to being in those circumstances, after living in those conditions, one would be prone to despair." Not only did he

become less judgmental, "[The experience] opened my eyes and [I] overcame the fear a lot of people have."

Carolyn comments, "One of the best things about this project is getting to know our interviewers from across the province. Each person was very different and they were all very engaged. I'm thankful for our interviewers."

Dr. Dewa is a Senior Scientist with the Health Systems Research and Consulting Unit at CAMH, Associate Professor in the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Toronto's Department of Health Policy, Management and Evaluation, and Program Head for CAMH's Work and Well-being Research and Evaluation Program. Her website is at: [Work and Well-Being](#)

"[The experience] opened my eyes and [I] overcame the fear a lot of people have."

The SEEI Corner

Final Phase 2 research reports recently posted to the SEEI website include:

- An Evaluation of Community Based Discharge Planning – Final Report

- Crisis Services – A Comparative Approach to Evaluation – Final Report

If you have a story or piece of information related to OMHAKEN that you would like to share, please do drop us a line. We'd love to hear from you. Please contact either Heather Bullock (Manager, Knowledge Exchange) at heather_bullock@camh.net or Nandini Saxena (Communications Associate) at nandini_saxena@camh.net.

Unless otherwise noted, all content is developed by Nandini Saxena.

OMHAKEN is on the Web!

Click [here](#) to view the OMHAKEN website.



OMHAKEN

To create and share the knowledge that will build a better mental health and addictions system.