

LIVING

Healing laughter gets a mental health twist

What's so funny about mental illness? Nothing and everything.

Nothing funny about the stigma, the discrimination, the lack of understanding — or the poverty and isolation that result from society's ignorance.

But David Granirer knows a thing or two about humour. He teaches a stand-up comedy clinic at Langara College in Vancouver. He also deals with depression. And about five years ago, it occurred to him that the power of laughter just might give people with mental illness the wherewithal to help themselves and teach others at the same time.

Thus was born Stand Up For Mental Health, a unique comedy troupe composed of people coping with everything from schizophrenia to borderline personality disorder.

They teach themselves to laugh at their own challenges, to rise above the fray. Then they take their show on the road, playing to schools, workplaces and community groups.

"We have to find unique ways to fight the stigma," Granirer says in a telephone interview.

"I've had people tell me: 'You could have sent a mental health expert to talk about this — and I probably would have forgotten everything they said.'"

Not so with the stand-up routine, which is playing to rave reviews from audiences and performers alike.



HELEN HENDERSON
Direct Access

which is offered through the Mood Disorders Association of Ontario.

Cole, who has been involved in theatre and the arts for most of his life, also has a background in comedy. Stand Up For Mental Health is a valuable tool to help people get through life, he says. "It fights anxiety and stigma. It's empowering."

It's also a big undertaking for participants, something not to be taken, ahem, lightly. It means hours of practice and a commitment putting in the necessary hours once a week for up to five months.

Students learn to write, structure and perform a short comedy act. There are long waiting lists to get in. And the group is always looking for additional funding to help it expand to meet needs.

For Granirer, who is the author of *The Happy Neurotic: How Fear and Angst Can Lead to Happiness and Success*, the project is a family affair. His son Jonathan, 12, does a stand-up routine about growing up with a parent who is mentally ill.

"He has been around people with labels all his life," Granirer says. "He has heard me talking on the phone to my psychiatrist and we've

ized I can talk to my kids."

Not everyone is suited to Stand Up For Mental Health. Applicants go through screening interviews to make sure the program will be a good fit.

First and foremost among the criteria, potential participants must have been labelled with a mental illness or be coping with mental health issues.

Among other things, they also must have stable housing, a support system of peers and professionals, a good grasp of English and the desire to bring about positive change through stand-up comedy.

Shows run 20 minutes to an hour, depending on the venue. The troupe usually charges "a modest fee" to cover costs and provide an honorarium for each of the performers.

They perform mornings, afternoons or evenings on campuses, in workplaces, at community events and in health care facilities.

For more information, check standupformentalhealth.com or call 416-486-8046.

If you're interested in supporting mental health issues, check out *Touched By Fire*, a free art show and sale at the Royal Ontario Museum, Thursday, Nov. 26 from 7 p.m. to 10 p.m.

Billed as "the art show you have to be crazy to enter," it features the work of Ontario artists with mood disorders.

For info, see touchedbyfire.ca or call 416-486-8046, ext. 222.

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David Granirer started Stand Up For Mental Health, a unique comedy troupe.

