

Peer support group helps those living with anxiety and mood disorders

Living with mental illness

By Linda O'Connor

The Intelligencer

Chris Gerbig talks openly today about his battle with anxiety and panic attacks. But it hasn't always been that way.

He remembers the shame he felt when he couldn't complete the developmental service worker program at Loyalist College because of constant anxiety attacks he had during classes.

Instead of admitting his problem and seeking help, he slipped a note under his professor's door, telling him he had personal problems and was dropping out of the program.

Living in Stirling at the time, he went to Belleville to have his anti-depression prescriptions filled because of his embarrassment and used the library in the city so no one in the village would know he was researching information about his disorder.

Working nights and going to school during the day, his panic attacks finally overtook him.

"It was this overwhelming

feeling of discomfort. You feel like you're going to pass out, you're going to die, or your head is going to explode."

His panic attacks would happen at school, on the bus and even at the doctor's office. Instead of giving into them, he tried to conceal it and appear normal. He later learned this was the wrong approach and only made his anxiety worse.

After trying some self-help approaches which had worked in the past, he finally went to a psychiatrist for help. The doctor wanted to put him on medication.

Because of an earlier addiction to drugs, he at first refused.

Active throughout his life, he said one of his lowest points came when he had to go on welfare < having to admit to the caseworker he had an anxiety disorder.

"It was really difficult applying for social assistance."

At this point, he was having 25 to 30 attacks a week. He

was restricted to his residence and even there he wasn't comfortable - attacks were even happening at his home.

"Going to the store for a quart of milk was a nightmare."

He finally went on medication and after many failures, things were starting to help.

Today, Gerbig leads the Belleville Anxiety & Mood Disorders Support Group, helping others struggling to cope with anxiety disorders, panic attacks and mood disorders.

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"Together we represent a stronger voice and help prevent the isolation and bewilderment that can be part of anxiety and depression."

- Facilitator Chris Gerbig

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 The group was originally a facilitated support group offered by the Canadian Mental Health Association, but when funding ran out in 2004, Gerbig and a couple

of other members agreed to take it over as an independent peer support group.

"I joined it when it first started and have been involved since the beginning," explained Gerbig. "I stuck with the group because it really helped me out."

He said the support group also provided him with connections - people experiencing the same feelings.

"I had really isolated myself from former associates, from friends. The group was a place to share experiences of strengths and hope."

The group was also a place to share their experiences of anxiety and depression.

"The only situation where my anxiety and depression could be used as an asset was in a support group," he noted.

His background as a graduate of social services has also helped him as facilitator of the peer support group.

He stressed confidentiality is a key principle of their meetings.

"Our goal is to help support people with anxiety and depression and improve the quality of their lives. We are respectful of the privacy and stress sensitivity of our members."

He said peer support helps because those who suffer the same conditions are in a unique position to understand and support one another.

"Together we represent a stronger voice and help prevent the isolation and bewilderment that can be a part of anxiety and depression."

He said peer support can work.

"We may not have all the answers or 'the cure,' but we have the experience of being there and surviving." Mental illness has had a huge impact on Gerbig's life. He said it took it 10 years to accept what was happening in his life.

"I finally realized this is going to be an endurance event; I realized I wasn't going to get better in a hurry."

He said he also accepted this may be something that may never go away.

"I know now it is a serious condition that I may have for the rest of my life."

But it doesn't mean he isn't hopeful. Gerbig said when he accepted his disease he also decided he wouldn't let it take control of him.

"When do you give yourself a chance to start living again?"

So he's very busy now facilitating the group and advocating for the mentally ill. And he's very up front about his condition, willing to share his story - something rare for people living with mental illness. Most would rather admit to anything else than to having a mental illness.

"There are a lot of people out there living with anxiety disorders, staying at home and becoming isolated.

They don't know about our support group."

He hopes to reach out to these people by going public about his condition.

"The support group is a place to connect with other people and feel normal again."

He said although meetings can be helpful, he knows how difficult it can be to make the first step to come out.

"No one knows it better than me how hard it can be. I know it can be a risk."

He said anyone interested can contact him first by e-mail or phone to find out more about the group.

For more information, call 961-0077, visit, www.geocities.com/bellevilleanxiety or e-mail bellevilleanxiety@yahoo.ca.

Support group reaches out

- **Belleville Anxiety and Mood disorders Support Group offers peer support group meetings.**
- **Meetings are for those who suffer from anxiety disorders, panic attacks, agoraphobia, social phobia, generalized anxiety, OCD, depression and bipolar disorder.**
- **Drop-in meetings are held every second and fourth Wednesday of the month from 7:00 p.m. to 8:30 p.m. at the Eastminister United Church (in Belleville).**

- **For information, call 961-0077 or e-mail bellevilleanxiety@yahoo.ca**
- **Visit their webpage at www.geocities.com/bellevilleanxiety**

The article was taken from the LIFE section of the Thursday May 11th edition of the Intelligencer. For further information about the article, contact Linda O'Connor, Life Editor, 962-9171 ext. 212.