



Wednesday May 10, 2006

I'm no expert, but I've been there...

Last Thursday I gave four speeches on mental health and mood disorders. I spoke to three grade 11 classes at my old high school (NTCI) and to one group of parents and youth at Ryerson. Last week was the dubbed '5 days to fight Stigma' week by the CAMH, the CMHA, the MDAO, and a bunch of other mental health organizations. It was a fantastic week with movie showings, presentations, and etc. For me though, it was a little more: that Thursday marked the first time I got to

open up to a volume of people who knew me...or at least recognized my face.

I went to NT's grade 11 classes with the knowledge that some of these students might recognize me and to my surprise, many did. I spoke to them with the intentions of minimizing the stigma associated with mood disorders and I found myself retelling my personal stories not just to them, but to an old favorite teacher too. The shock and surprise in audience's faces (specifically my old teacher) staggered me the most. Sure I was a good kid back in the day (and I like to believe I still am) but is it that surprising that this teen had a bout of depression and OCD? ...okay, maybe it is, even though I always knew I was crazy I guess I played it pretty damn cool in high school.

After the evening speech, I met this guy who had some interesting things to say. We talked about the recovery process and to what extent one needs drugs to assist in mental health. Through all my battles, recoveries, public speaking campaigns, and work on the MDAO Board of Directors, I have come to some conclusions.

In an email days later, the guy I met reiterated my thoughts to me; he said, "our perception of reality is entirely our responsibility." Clearly since these are my sentiments recapped, I completely agree. This leads me to the one consistency that I have come to recognize in my recoveries: I (or maybe we) have to take responsibility for our own hard times. Simply put, there are no excuses. What this means is that no fight with a partner/parent/peer can excuse neglecting bad moods. Bad moods come and go like hills on a marathon course, and each hill needs to be taken at pace, responsibly speaking. I view the mind the same way I view the body:

1. **If your body hurts, you go to a doctor;** not necessarily for a quick fix with medication, but more so for the justification and identification that something is wrong. Once this is done, you can take ownership for the ailment, examine the treatment options, and work through it. **Hence, if your mind hurts, go to a doctor!** So often is the case (with both the mind and the body) that healthy living can cure many ailments. We know the axiom, 'an apple a day keeps the doctor away' well what it means is that a smart responsible balanced lifestyle (which includes eating, sleeping, exercising, socializing, volunteering, and relaxing) keeps the GP and shrink away.
2. **Talk about it and bring flowers!** I cannot speak for men, but girls get together and talk about their bodies all the time. My girlfriends, gay friends, sister, and

mother know all about each other's menstrual cycles (in the case of gay friends, they just know about mine). Girls have no shame talking about their periods, or...in my case, lack thereof (yes, I ran a marathon and yes runners rarely get their periods, and no I'm not pregnant). ← See; look at this, no shame! So, **why are we ashamed to talk about depression, OCD, postpartum, and bipolar?** If your classmate or co-worker gets cancer, we are all sympathetic. We show up at the hospital with cards, candies, and flowers. Why then will no one venture down to the local psych ward and visit your friend with bipolar? [I must admit some thing here, however; I am guilty of this. I never once visited either of my acquaintances who were in an eating disorder clinic last semester; however, if anyone remembers, I was never that close to them to begin with. For this I say, do the cancer test so that you don't feel guilty: ask yourself, if they had cancer, would you visit with flowers? My answer is, to those two girls I probably would not have visited at all...thus, little guilt in this case for not showing up at the psych ward].

3. **Is it contagious?** We all know what illnesses are contagious and what is not. Think back to the 1980s with AIDS. There was a) a ton of shame associated with the disease and b) a ton of ignorance too. Now, we all know AIDS is not contagious, but there are prevention precautions we all take (*no glove, no love!*). The same parallel exists for mood disorders: they are not contagious; **we just need to be educated** to know this. And, while they are not contagious there are **precautions** that you, as the loved one of an afflicted, can and must take. This means that you have to **take care of yourself** first and foremost before helping a friend. You are of no good to a friend if you are sick as well. To take care of yourself you need to be in tune with your body and mind and make sure they are in check as well; like I said, you cannot neglect your emotions. This, of course also requires you to educate yourself on your friend's illness. You need to know the warning signs and symptoms.
4. **Different band-aids for similar scrapes.** Just like cancer in which there are many different types of chemo's, radiations, and treatment options for similar cancers, mood disorders have a lot of different treatment options. This is of course why it's important to see a doctor or an outlet that can educate you on the options. **Treatment is not one size fits all, nor will it always work the first time around. Don't give up.** This means that some people will require medication and some might just need a bit of talk therapy; there is no shame in the route you take.
5. **Training for life, happiness, and marathons.** I treat mental health like physical fitness: One day and one hill at a time. As many people know I just ran my first (half) marathon. I trained for 16 weeks and I came in second place in my age category. I had a damn good novice time. During my training, I was faced with obstacles and barriers: tendonitis in my left foot, knee pain, essays and school work, and parties (one of which included a night of St. Patrick Day festivities with

an 8 mile run after multiple keg stands and shots of whiskey). So, how is happiness and mental health like a training routine? The point to notice is that **the road to happiness is a road in itself**. I've said it before, it's about ups and downs, and set backs and jumps forward. Every injury needs to be addressed or you'll never make it to the end. I owe it to my awesome chiropractor who helped me get to the finish line. I also, of course, owe it to my friends who dragged me out on St. Paddies and showed me that I am capable of drinking my ass off and running the next day: when you feel the need to indulge in what might feel like a set back, you must also remember that after, you need to get up and **move forward**.

-Meghan O'Keefe

(used with permission, from Meghan O'Keefe's Blog)

<http://www.megsokeefe.blogspot.com> (Blog Archives, May 2006)