

Breaking the cycle

Mental health treatment at MSH puts the patient 'front and centre,' ensures continuity of care for recurring illness

Deborah Rotta-Loria has had rapid-cycling bipolar disorder for the last 30 years. But the 58-year-old has only spoken publicly about it in the past two. Her silence was partly because of improper diagnoses for 17 years, ranging from depression to PMS to postpartum depression.

Doctors couldn't figure out what was causing her mood swings, which she describes as going from "not being able to get off the kitchen floor crying to, within 24 hours, my 'CEO mode,' where I had boundless energy," which was, she says, "phenomenal." She admits, however, that she was "always waiting for the other shoe to drop."

Finally, in 2000, she was sent to Dr. Rus Sethna, chief of psychiatry at Markham Stouffville Hospital, who diagnosed her with rapid-cycling bipolar disorder, an essential feature of which is the occurrence of four or more mood episodes during the previous 12 months.

After she was on the right medication, she started to feel better. "I was able to stop the chaos in my head," she says. But for a long time, she told only close friends and family that there was something wrong.

The decision to go public is one that many with mental illness face. It's made more difficult by the misinformation and stigma that surrounds the issue. "I think that stigma fosters a sense of fearfulness and it results in a lot of resistance to receiving treatment and care," says Dr. Sethna. "It can be a very alienating experience."

Markham Stouffville Hospital aims to offer a counter narrative through educational events and initiatives, such as the climb to Mount Kilimanjaro a few years ago that helped fund the hospital's new mental health department and raise awareness of the need for more education and services.

MSH also tries to bring programs into the community, including the new Child & Adolescent Mental Health Day Hospital, designed with York Region District School Board to help kids whose anxiety or depression is preventing them from going to class.

The physical setting also speaks to the hospital's stance. "When you walk into MSH, the first thing you see is the outpatient mental health department," says Dr. Sethna. "That's kind of unheard of — psychiatry was always at the back of the hospital — but at MSH, mental health treatment is front and centre."

We are leaders at protecting individuals from stigmatization."

In Rotta-Loria's case, she found that, when she revealed she had bipolar disorder, some people tried to ignore it or even tried to fix it. But she remembers one friend who reacted well. "A dear friend said, 'I have no idea what you're going through and I don't want to know. But you tell me how I can help you move on with your life.'"

That message of acceptance was exactly what Rotta-Loria needed. And it's what most people would want, Dr. Sethna adds. "I think the most important thing is that friends and family process the information in a non-judgmental fashion and are openly supportive, because when people are feeling the most vulnerable, it's important to feel accepted."

It's still a challenge, Rotta-Loria says, revealing that when she went through a period of depression last March, it took her too long to admit something was wrong and ask for help. "When you start to feel well, then you think, there's nothing wrong with me. I think that's why a lot of people go off medication. You think it'll pass...it'll pass."

The cyclic nature of mental health problems means it's important for doctors — as well as patients — to think of it as something likely to recur over a lifetime, says Dr. Sethna. In view of that perspective, Markham Stouffville Hospital provides seamless care, ensuring that patients have the same doctor over different settings, including outpatient and crisis care, and that adolescents receive support when they are shifted to adult-based services.

The doctors also take a long-term view of mental illness, staying in touch with patients and trying to provide continued contact.

"One of the most common reasons why someone will come back to us in a state of despair is, paradoxically, the sense of wellness," says Dr. Sethna. "It's really important to have access to a person that knows your illness. We try to offer that here at MSH, but humans being human, when people are feeling well, they tend to take license with their health."

Rotta-Loria is happy she chose to reveal her disease.

"I've nurtured this secret for such a long time that I feel if I can come out and talk about it, it's going to have its downside, but it's going to have an incredible upside as well," she says. "And it is allowing me to take a step out of this very little box I have built for myself."

Visit msh.on.ca for information.

FRASER DOUGLAS



Dr. Rus Sethna, chief of psychiatry at Markham Stouffville Hospital contends that the stigma around mental health problems means people don't face up to their illness and can stop seeking treatment, even though it is often cyclical in nature.



DEBORAH IS OUT OF BED THANKS TO MSH AND IT HAS INSPIRED HER GENEROUS GIFT OF NEW BEDS.

Some days Deborah felt so incredibly low she couldn't get out of bed. Other days, she was in complete control. Ups and downs came at dizzying speeds. Deborah was diagnosed with Rapid Cycling Bipolar disease by Dr. Rus Sethna at Markham Stouffville Hospital. Now, 12 years later, she's functioning well as a wife, a mother and an active community volunteer. She's also a passionate advocate of removing the shame and stigma associated with mental health. Because of her outstanding treatment at MSH, she's a huge supporter of our Buy A Bed campaign. Government does not fund all new equipment at the hospital. Your support has a huge impact on the lives of others. **Buy a Bed. Be a Life Saver.**

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Vital signs

- 1 in 5 people in Ontario has a mental health problem or suffers from addiction.
- 12 per cent of Canadians have an anxiety disorder.
- 46 per cent of Canadians think people excuse bad behaviour by calling it mental illness.
- 27 per cent of people are fearful of people with serious mental illness.
- 70 per cent of mental health problems start in childhood or adolescence.
- 1.5 times more is the likelihood that women will have mood or anxiety disorders, compared to men.
- 500,000 Canadians are unable to work because of mental health problems per week.



THIS IS THE SECOND IN A SERIES OF FOUR. LOOK FOR "CARDIAC HEALTH" NEXT SAT., NOV. 2.