



Schizophrenia Societies' new shared mission statement emphasizes quality of life

For 24-year-old Tammy Lambert, the key to managing her mental illness is addressing all facets of her life rather than centring only on the illness.

Diagnosed with depression with psychotic features at age 14, Ms. Lambert spent the next several years in and out of hospitals and treatment centres. Her diagnosis changed over time, first to bipolar and then finally to schizoaffective disorder. Her symptoms included major fluctuations in mood, described as rapid cycling. Her mood shifted wildly from elation to feelings of self-harm in a matter of hours.



Tammy Lambert

Ms. Lambert admits she was on a negative path in terms of her own behaviour and response to the illness. Then she was issued a challenge from her caregivers in order to reach her full potential: begin taking her illness seriously and begin taking an active part in her treatment and recovery. It was her personal turning point.

With the physical and medical aspects of her illness under control with medication, psychiatric care and psychosocial rehabilitation, she began making changes in all areas of her life. An incredibly supportive family, friends, health workers, self-help groups, educational pursuits, volunteer work and extensive journal writing to detail her journey with mental illness – all have helped Ms. Lambert achieve a successful balance in her ongoing recovery.

“You have to focus on the illness to a degree, but you also have to look at the larger picture. You have to move forward,” Ms. Lambert said.

Focusing on the individual and their quality of life rather than on the illness itself is at the heart of a new mission statement that has been jointly developed and adopted by the Schizophrenia Society of Canada and the 10 provincial Schizophrenia Societies across the country.

The new mission of the organizations is: *to improve the quality of life for those affected by schizophrenia and psychosis through education, support programs, public policy and research.*

The new statement is particularly meaningful for Ms. Lambert and other individuals affected by schizophrenia and their family and friends.

“It focuses more on the people and on their quality of life. It reinforces the idea that there’s more to the person than their illness,” Ms. Lambert said.

“This exciting new mission statement recognizes the significant changes in our understanding of and approaches to mental illness over the last 20 years,” said Chris Summerville, Interim Chief Executive Officer of the SSC.

“Today, the emphasis is rightly upon the possibility of recovery, not the mere reduction of suffering. Thus a shared mission statement more accurately reflects the purpose of the work of the schizophrenia societies across Canada,” Mr. Summerville said. “It represents our shared passion to advocate for mental health services that are recovery oriented and enhance quality of life, that advance the needs, rights and abilities of people living with and affected by schizophrenia and psychosis.”

Replacing 11 similarly-intentioned missions with one united statement represents an opportunity to build on the cooperation and partnerships that currently exist and share the expertise and successes of each individual society for the benefit of all societies across the country.

“Obviously there has always been cooperation and partnership among the societies because we are all working towards the same goal of improving the lives of people affected by schizophrenia,” Mr. Summerville said, “but each organization is independent and has its own priorities in terms of programming and activities.”

The previous mission statements, for the most part, included a focus on the symptoms, suffering and chronic nature of the illness. These aspects of the illness, while a key priority for the societies, did not actively promote improved quality of life.

“Through our work, we strive to help affected individuals not only receive the immediate treatment they need,” said Schizophrenia Society of Canada President Michael Thomson, “but we also seek to provide or advocate for the additional supports and services that will aid people in achieving the maximum quality of life they can.”

“Quality of life is very individual. The new mission statement reflects that individuality. It encourages working towards the recovery level and quality of life that is possible for each person and each family,” Mr. Thomson added.

One person may have a good support system and access to services, but hasn’t yet achieved the right balance with medication. For that person, improving quality of life would include achieving that balance so that symptom relief is maximized. For another person who has achieved good symptom control, improving their quality of life may mean accessing vocational supports or educational training so that they can return to work.

Building on the foundation of medical and psychiatric treatment, a host of additional supports – including community-based psychiatric rehabilitation with access to psychological support services, peer support, family education, safe and affordable housing, adequate income security, meaningful work, access to psychological support services, court diversion programs and mental health courts -- can assist individuals and families to further improve their quality of life and achieve their own level of recovery.

“People can and do recover from severe mental illness,” Mr. Summerville said. “The new mission statement promotes the hope and goal of a return to a quality of life for those experiencing schizophrenia and psychosis, rather than the goal of symptom reduction on its own.”

Incorporating many of those factors into her own journey of recovery has been successful for Ms. Lambert. She is quick to point out that the ideas of quality of life and recovery do not mean someone is cured. She continues to experience symptoms daily.

“Recovery doesn’t mean you are symptom free. It doesn’t necessarily mean you are off medication. It means that you have the support you need and you are doing the best you can. Quality of life means to live the best possible life with what you’ve been given.”

Ms. Lambert continues to pursue her own improved quality of life. She is currently attending university towards her Bachelor of Arts Degree. She volunteers with the Manitoba Schizophrenia Society and participates in its education program, visiting classrooms and workplaces to put a human face to illnesses that are still widely misunderstood and feared.

She is also writing a book based on her experiences with mental illness. It features her journal writings and poems, composed throughout the 10 years since her diagnosis. It has been a major catalyst in her own journey of recovery and she hopes it will benefit others as well.

“It’s possible to live your life despite the fact that you have schizophrenia,” Ms. Lambert said. “I hope, relating to other people’s experiences with mental illness, that my book will one day have an impact on and touch peoples’ lives.”

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