

A DISCUSSION ABOUT MENTAL ILLNESS IN YORK REGION: A SIX-PART SERIES

YORK REGION MEDIA GROUP LAUNCHES 6-PART SERIES

This is just one of many stories about a family's struggle and roller-coaster world of ups and downs once a diagnosis of mental illness is made.

Our investigation into mental health in York Region launches as part of Mental Health Week in Ontario from May 5 to 11.

Over the next few weeks, we take a look at mental illness from the public health and safety point of view.

We investigate hospital protocols on how they handle potentially violent patients. We speak with York Region's mental health practitioners and administrators to reveal their ongoing challenges.

We also hear from residents how the system has helped and failed them.

In light of a recent Toronto coroner's report on three mental patient shootings, we share new police methodologies for dealing with individuals whose mental instability poses a risk to themselves and others. Legal professionals, physicians, mental health administrators and panelists from the recent National Symposium on Mental Disorder and Criminal Justice provide opinion.

And, finally, we talk to York Regional Police about what the force is doing to deal with this issue, the training, protocol and challenges officers face.

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Email your comments and/or suggestions to jmason@yrmg.com

- Crisis Support Line (24 hrs) 310-2673 (COPE)
- Community Crisis Response Service (24 hours) 310-2673 (COPE)
- Kids Help Phone (24 hrs) 1-800-668-6868
- Markham-Stouffville Hospital Crisis Team 905-472-7556
- Pathways for Children 905-471-7877



Schizophrenia:
One family's journey

STAFF PHOTO/STEVE SOMERVILLE

Markham residents Julie and Gord Combdon are parents to an adult son who has struggled with mental health issues. The couple openly shares their trials and tribulations.

BY CHRIS TRABER
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In the tranquility of their bucolic offices, Julie and Gord Combdon speak of turmoil.

Solemnly, they explain the difficult path and pain they have shared with her son, his stepchild, diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia at 23.

Today, four years after the formal medical verdict, the couple — she, a medspa owner, he a registered massage therapist — both in the quaint hamlet of Victoria Square, admitted something was awry long before.

A stepdad to Colin since the lad was three, Mr. Combdon believed the boy's anger was typical teenage behaviour.

As the rage, agitation and distance from family grew, so did the Combdons' concern.

Mrs. Combdon often felt threatened by her son, she said.

"His anger was so extreme," Mr. Combdon said. "We walked on egg shells."

After a severe conflict with his biological father, with whom he lived, Colin was hospitalized at Southlake Regional Health Centre in Newmarket.

A 72-hour admittance became a two-week stay.

Although no consolation, the psychosis diagnosis provided a few answers and raised many more. It also marked the first turn in a

series of institutional revolving doors.

Colin's damaged psyche led to self-requested stays at Southlake and, eventually, Mackenzie Health in Richmond Hill and Ontario Shores Centre for Mental Health Sciences in Whitby.

Colin felt safe in psychiatric facilities, the Combdons surmised.

Doctors at the facilities prescribed various pharmaceutical combinations.

The drugs induced either more anger or total lethargy, his mom said.

Cognitive behaviour therapy, proven to help many patients, is voluntary, the couple said. As such, Colin declined.

"My son still doesn't feel there's anything wrong with him," she said. "When a patient is ready for therapy, the system often isn't."

It has been a difficult process, Mr. Combdon said of clinicians' need to discharge seemingly stabilized patients, caring for them at home, worrying about their well-being and your own. And, when a relapse occurs, as it did in 2013, it's an onerous task navigating queues back toward a hospital bed.

Colin has been clear of psychiatric facilities for one year and is off medications, his mother said. He receives Ontario disability support program assistance. Because he resides alternately in Markham and Newmarket, he can't be assigned a psychiatrist, she said.

"That's a flaw," she said. "One day is differ-

ent from another for Colin."

The Combdons have researched the malady and infrastructure in place to treat it.

They are hopeful.

Schizophrenia can relent as a patient grows older, Mr. Combdon said. In the interim, the couple communicates with Colin daily, helps him with small tasks and has short visits.

"He's not able to stay focused," she said.

The couple advocates for understanding and empathy when dealing with mental illness.

Too often, people are too judgmental, Mr. Combdon said. Mental health issues need to be de-stigmatized.

Caregivers must be pro-active to get help on behalf of their loved ones, Mrs. Combdon said.

"You have to ask," she said. "It's not offered. You have to be their substitute decision maker."

A more pro-active mental health care system, availability of specialists who not only offer therapies, but mentoring for patients and an end to long wait lists would result in better outcomes, the couple said.

"We're always searching, struggling through a wet mine field," Mr. Combdon said. "It's hugely important to never, ever give up on the person."

Mrs. Combdon nods and dabs a tear. "Colin knows, no matter what, we're there for him."

One in five children, youth and adults is affected by mental health issues. Each year during Mental Health Week, Children's Mental Health Ontario and the Canadian Mental Health Association Ontario call attention to the importance of good mental health and to the role each of us has in supporting those with mental health challenges.

The goal of the week is to engage communities and individuals across Ontario to increase understanding of mental health issues, reduce the stigma associated with mental illnesses and spread the message that help is available.

About 70 per cent of all mental health problems arise before the age of 18, Children's Mental Health Ontario president and CEO Gordon Floyd said.

"If we can get young people help early, we can prevent problems from becoming more serious," he said.

"There should be no shame in talking about mental health issues. The more we talk about this, the more we reduce the associated shame and stigma so that young people can get the help they need when they need it most."

This year, Canadian Mental Health Association Ontario is using Mental Health Week to focus on women, who are 40 per cent more likely than men to develop a mental illness.