LIFTING THE VEIL ON MENTAL ILLNESS

By Quinta Iticka

According to the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA), one in five Canadians will experience mental illness in their lifetime; however, despite this statistic, the epidemic of mental illness remains shrouded by stigma and reticence. Unfortunately, silence is the worst remedy possible.

According to the CMHA:

The annual economic cost attributable to mental health issues in Canada is $51 billion;

1.2 million Canadian children and youth are affected by mental illness, but less than 20% receive appropriate treatment; and

More than 60% of people with mental health problems don’t seek help due to stigma.

Cindy Radu FCFA, FCA understands the challenges of having a mental health disorder. She is an accomplished professional accountant and tax lawyer who has experienced depression. She is also a CMHA board member and mental health advocate who recognized the need for more awareness about mental health issues after a friend’s suicide attempts. Disappointed by insensitive comments such as “snap out of it” and “tough it out” from “educated, well-meaning individuals,” she decided to write a book to create opportunities for dialogue about the issues.

In 2012, Cindy collaborated with John Gulak, a Calgary lawyer and community volunteer, to create Sick to Death of the Silence: Stories to break down the stigma of mental illness, an inspirational collection of personal stories that focus on hope, recovery, and resilience.
“These individuals, and thousands like them, are people we encounter and rely on every day. They are people with whom we work, volunteer, pray, create, study, defend and protect our community. People who form the fabric of humanity and enrich our society.”

— Cindy Radu, FCPA, FCA

The book features 15 Calgarians of varying ages and educational and occupational backgrounds courageously sharing their experiences with different forms of mental illness. The individuals profiled include a recent university graduate living with anxiety and depression; a paramedic with post-traumatic stress disorder; a former senior executive who experienced paralyzing panic attacks; and a young woman with an eating disorder.

“These individuals, and thousands like them, are people we encounter and rely on every day,” Cindy writes in the preface of the book. “They are people with whom we work, volunteer, pray, create, study, defend and protect our community. People who form the fabric of humanity and enrich our society.”

John Gulak, Vice President of Legal and Fun at Prairie Merchant, says the book is designed to be a catalyst for conversation. “People felt very strongly about sharing their stories because there is usually loneliness associated with mental illness,” he adds.

Cindy also wishes to highlight, and dispel, the discrimination that surrounds these illnesses: “An employer would not write off a potential candidate suffering from diabetes or cancer, but people with mental disorders sometimes have difficulties finding work, especially if their stories are publicly documented,” she says. “I think this greatly reduces the talent pool.”

In the foreword of the book, Laureen MacNeil, Executive Director of CMHA Calgary, comments on the power of breaking the silence and secrecy of mental illness: “We know from our education work in the community that when someone stands up and tells their story, others connect, reflect and are inspired to either get help or change their attitude toward mental health. In our experience, it is almost always a change for the better.”

In addition to eliminating stigma, John emphasizes the importance of the human element in recovery. “People may need clinical and professional support, but they also need human support, and the significance of this is often underestimated,” he says. “Compassion and empathy are important. In cultures where people have less money and more time, they intuitively know what to do. None of this is rocket science.”

Cindy agrees and notes: “Close friends, neighbours, colleagues, and family members are in a great position to provide support. If someone is struggling, a safe conversation may be the first step to getting help.”

She believes an open dialogue sends a message that people with mental illness deserve respect, understanding, and opportunities. And change is progressive: the book, along with the CMHA, aim to arm the next generation with knowledge, resources, and tools to fight this overlooked epidemic.

Sick to Death of the Silence: Stories to break down the stigma of mental illness is available for sale at Shelf Life Books in Calgary or from the Canadian Mental Health Association (Calgary).

For additional resources about mental illness, visit cmha.calgary.ab.ca.

Your mental health matters to us. CPA Assist helps Alberta CPAs, candidates, and their immediate families address mental health and other personal and professional issues. This 24/7 service is free, confidential, and provides professional counselling and peer support. For more information about the CPA Assistance and Wellness Program, visit cpa-assist.ca.