

CMHA's Hearing Voices program helps support people with realities that differ from societal norms?

Nicole D. Parker was once told she would not only be unable to go back to school because she was too unwell, but she wouldn't be able to work, either.

When a friend asked later on why she couldn't go back to school, she couldn't think of an answer ? and now Parker shares her story in the hopes of inspiring others as one of the co-facilitators of Hearing Voices, a one-of-a-kind support group for ?individuals who experience realities that differ from societal norms ? including psychosis, schizophrenia, and hearing voices.?

Parker, who is based out of Alliston, has brought professional expertise and lived experience to the group for almost eight years and is dedicated to normalizing these experiences ?while reducing isolation and loneliness through a judgement-free, supportive environment.?

Parker says she developed the workshop for alternate realities, or what she describes as ?busy brains?, and subsequently pitched it to the Canadian Mental Health Association of York Region (CMHA-YRSS) and South Simcoe. It was a model quickly picked up by the CMHA and she and co-facilitator Brian hit the ground running.

?It's been pretty important to us,? says Parker. ?I always say labels are for soup cans, so I talk more about normalizing the experience and having it welcomed because we talk about anxiety, we talk about depression, but then when people start saying stuff like, ?The Queen of England is coming to save me,? people don't listen as much as if they're saying they're sad. I want to normalize the experience, have a place where people can come and share their experience without feeling judged, and they're heard.?

Hearing Voices started out as an in-person meet-up organized out of the CMHA's Aurora offices, but has remained virtual since the Global Pandemic, allowing them to reach people throughout York Region and South Simcoe.

Parker stresses whether it's in-person or online, it's a safe environment for everyone and an open forum for dialogue.

?You can ask whatever questions you want. I'll answer any questions,? she says. ?I've had people who have asked me, ?Have you heard positive voices? and ?Have you had positive experiences? I'll say, yes, and they'll ask what happened to it. I'll tell them when I took medication, they slowly faded away, but they're still there really quietly. I'm honest with my experiences.?

Indeed, touching upon how the idea of ?hearing voices? was approached over the years, she says the early half of the twentieth century, sometimes hearing voices was interpreted as a ?spiritual psychosis,? but that is just one example of the brain trying to ?rationalize? the experience.

?They'll make a connection because your brain has to rationalize why you're having these feelings and emotions and hearing these voices,? she says. ?It's like normalizing and validating the experience. I'm not here to say if it's real or not real; I'm there to support them, get them through that feeling and have them feel better. People can be as private as they want in this group. If they just want to have their camera and mic off and just listen, they can do that. They can write an alias if they want an alias name, as long as we know the right name for the organization. If you don't want to be identified, but you want to be a part of the group, we can make that happen. If you need support and you're scared of that stigma or being identified, we're there to help. Self-stigma is a big one. We share personal stories, too. For instance, I was told that as a psychiatrist I'd never be able to go back to school because I was too unwell and that I'd never work. I got told all these things, but someone said to me later in life, ?Why can't you go to school? What's the big deal? I was like, ?Oh, I guess I can.? To give hope rather than saying you're not going to be able to do something is better.?

?I find that people really enjoy the group. In one session, I'll talk about how to scrapbook, track your voices and map them. One gentleman said he's found that really helpful because he was able to do the tracking, but also used it for his addiction. People were able to use the group for two things rather than just the voices.?

Hearing Voices is run through the CMHA-YRSS' Community Connections Program. For more information on living with psychosis and the various ways the CMHA might be able to help, visit cmha-yr.on.ca/living-with-psychosis.

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter