

?We're all in this together? on Mental Health Week: CMHA

By Brock Weir

There was once a time where Leah Badar would never have considered sharing her story.

She had no self-esteem, says she was afraid of everything and everyone, but, when she reached a low point, she reached out for a helping hand.

?Before the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA), I felt like a naked baby in the mouth of a stork who opened its mouth one day and said, ?Fly! Have a nice life!' and it dropped me,? explains Ms. Badar. ?I had to get up, dust myself off, and find my clothes. When I ran into the CMHA, I didn't even know my head from my tail.?

Ms. Badar's story is one of abuse and bullying throughout her life, and one she now shares to raise awareness of Mental Health wherever she can.

This week marks Mental Health Week, which runs May 7 ? May 13. As the Canadian Mental Health Association marks its 100th anniversary this year, Mental Health Week is now in its sixty-seventh, dedicated to ending the stigma surrounding mental illness. Throughout this week of raising awareness, the CMHA is calling on the community to ?tune into your own mental health needs and #getloud about what mental health really is.?

?Getting Loud? is something Ms. Badar had to learn how to do.

The first step, she says, was finding that all-too-elusive comfort level both within herself and within the programs offered by the CMHA.

?I couldn't go on the way I was going on,? she shares. ?It just wasn't living. Yet, at the time, I had four kids. I was in an abusive marriage and the CMHA helped me with a lot of life skills. I am so lucky.?

Now, the mother of five, Ms. Badar has found the foundation of support and confidence given to her by the CMHA has found myriad off-shoot benefits within her own family.

Ms. Badar says she has battled a learning disability throughout her life and marvels that two of her children are now shooting for their PhDs, while her younger daughter, 16, is maintaining high school marks well into their nineties.

?It gave me more confidence to start believing in themselves,? she says.

She is now using her story, in turn, to inspire confidence inside the clients now turning to the CMHA for support. Ms. Badar is now a member of their Speaker's Bureau, a public role she never could have imagined for herself. Yet, as she shares her story, Ms. Badar says she finds rewards keep rolling in.

?Honestly, just as much as I give, I get back tenfold,? she says. ?When you see people come in so broken, but they begin to trust you and feel safe with you, you see them realise you really care and understand. I have had people who wouldn't even make eye contact, who wouldn't talk, who wouldn't join in a group or nothing ? and now it's like you can't shut them up! One came in, was sleeping all day, and was so scared to get a job and didn't have a hobby. They wanted to go to school and was scared, but now he is doing all that. I volunteer in the peer-run after hours drop in group, and I said, ?Had we not had that, would you have done all this?' He said, ?Probably not' I realised then that I wish I had that kind of stuff when I was going through my own stuff.?

She had been down that road before. Ms. Badar went back to school at the age of 48 to become a Personal Support Worker, graduated with honours ? an accomplishment she is particularly proud of after being in Special Education throughout her previous time as a student ? lost 100 pounds and regained control of her life.

When she shares her story, she says others can see just what is possible after taking that all-important first step.

?Recently, I spoke to [a group] of PSWs and there was one woman who couldn't believe I understood what she was going through. She thought she was the only one and broke down and I said, ?That's okay. Can I give you a hug?' It is rewarding to see people start trusting me and opening up. They get comfort knowing that you know. I'll say to them, ?Okay, how can we break this down? How can we make things better? What kind of help do you need?' I'll then refer them to all the CMHA has to offer.

?But, first of all, you have to realise that you need help. Second of all, you have to try and help yourself because people cannot do it for you. I have come a long way, but you have to want to help yourself and you have to be willing and open to listen to people, people that you trust, and that you feel safe in confiding in. Don't give up, it is really worth it. You can live a well-rounded, positive, healthy life.?

For more information on the Canadian Mental Health Association of York and South Simcoe, visit cmha-yr.on.ca, or call 905-841-3977.