

Mental Health First Aiders: Lived Experience

Through Reach Out Together, young professionals are sharing their stories of mental health, healing, and growth.

TORONTO, ON, CANADA, March 31, 2021 /EINPresswire.com/ -- Mental Health First Aid is an evidence-based frontline mental health course which offers participants confidence and skills for effective crisis prevention and response.

In short, it's about reaching out to those struggling with mental health and helping them find what they need to move forward.

The Mental Health Commission of Canada describes the practice as follows:

"Mental Health First Aid is given until appropriate professional treatment is received or until the crisis resolves. Thus, it includes the full range of developing mental disorders and associated crises...MHFA training is designed to also be appropriate for non-health professionals."

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There's definitely help out there, but it might not be the help you think it's going to be."

Jazz Rakkar

Natalie Susi, a California-based UCSD professor of communications, who teaches a course entitled "The Pursuit of Happiness", describes herself as "a teacher by trade and by heart."

The core of her lesson is an emphasis on growth through adversity. As with Aanchal Vashistha's work at Reach Out

Together, her approach is influenced heavily by Jack Canfield and his signature "success formula": event plus response equals outcome.



The graphic features a red background with the text "Mental Health First-Aid" in large white letters. Below this is a white horizontal bar with the word "RESOURCES" in red. A large white heart with a white cross inside is centered below the bar. In the top right corner, there is a small logo for "REACH OUT TOGETHER" with a hand icon. At the bottom, there is a small text line: "@ROTAMBASSADOR | WWW.REACHOUTTOGETHER.COM Source: facebook.com/rotambassador".

Mental Health First Aid, a program in self-care and community mental health support.

"If you're in a dark place, what I now call a cocoon moment...this is just a dark moment in time, and it will open up to light on the other side," she says in the inaugural "season 2" interview for Reach Out Together's weekly Mental Health Impact Series.

"Knowing this helps you move through that darkness quicker; with a "cocoon process."

Susi outlines this process as follows:

"The first step is just accepting and identifying the moment and finding the phrases and moments that work for you."

These phrases include "affirmations", which are statements of clear, specific goals, of gratefulness, and of accomplishment.

"Step two is to find your process for getting through it."

Assessing where you are and where you want to be is also a central aspect of Mental Health First Aid, allowing participants to develop a clear plan of action.

Finally, the third step: "When you meditate, you get your thoughts, your speech and your feelings in alignment, and you make that energetic bubble around you coherent."

Susi credits this 'holistic' approach with helping her to adjust to weaning off of Lexapro, an SSRI antidepressant, after 12 years.

"I think it's my responsibility to say 'Yes, medication helped, but I really wish I'd been aware that there were so many other things that could help, too,'" she says in a moment of reflection.

Natalia Perez-Segnini, a New York-based personal trainer and fitness coach, describes a personal journey of self-discovery in which her overall approach to mental health changed in tandem with a change in daily self-care habits.

"For many, many years I saw my family members as adjectives...as their condition, and not as the

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humans that they are. I didn't educate myself and immerse myself in what they were feeling," she says.

"It wasn't until I got to a more mature state of mind that I understood that you can have a condition, but you aren't that condition."

Perez-Segnini emphasizes the role of our inner dialogue in our mental health.

Describing her recovery process, she says, "That's where [it] really started: having a conversation with myself, nutrition, and then fitness. These are core foundational things that I'll have for the rest of my life."

Ultimately, her message is: "There's always time to change your narrative."

Amanda Ihome, a psychotherapist living in Lagos, Nigeria, started out aiming to be a neurosurgeon, but took a turn toward learning psychotherapy, with her family's encouragement. Defining her work, she says:

"Psychotherapy is the use of therapeutic interventions to help treat mental illnesses, through the medium of talking...Psychotherapy is in essence talk therapy."

She encourages those who need support to seek out professional psychotherapy first.

Comparing her own experience with depression to the context of her work environment, Ihome says, "I faced a lot more stigma when I was sick than I've witnessed while practicing...I've just had people tell me, 'I'm so grateful to have found you, because I'm looking for help.'"

She advises those whose social network lacks the awareness or tools to help to instead focus on self-care, to break stigma by example rather than "pushing" acceptance of unfamiliar concepts.

"If you push too hard, people aren't going to listen to you. As adults, we still learn by 'modelling,'" says Ihome. "What you can do is, take care of yourself. People will start to ask questions about how you got better."

Jazz Rakkar, a photographer and mental health advocate in Leicester, U.K., echoes this call for self-care.

Speaking of his lived experience with bulimia nervosa, Rakkar says, "There's definitely help out there, but it might not be the help you think it's going to be...I didn't realize I was going to be the one to help myself."

He compares the pattern of behaviour in bulimia to an addiction, saying recovery involved recognizing and desensitizing himself to triggers.

Because, Rakkar says, of long waitlists and not fitting exact criteria, he found it difficult to access professional support and looked inward for his own strength.

If at first humour was a way to “mask” internal struggle, he says it has become a tool in his toolkit for recovery.

“If I can make a joke about it, I can definitely get over it.”

After what he calls a “breaking point” of weight loss two years ago, he says he has been in recovery, if one at times “bumpy”.

As Rakkar continues his own self-care process, he uses what he’s learned to look out for those around him.

He urges people to watch for small signs of behavioural change in those close to them, and to speak up when concerned.

“I can see the signs now, but you definitely have to pry the information out of our mouths.”

Rakkar’s message is in line with the purpose of Mental Health First Aid: We can’t always get rid of triggers, but we can change our responses to them.

If you have professional insight or lived experience with mental health that you’d like to share, please reach out to us at event@reachouttogether.com.

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