

FEBRUARY 2024

MENTAL HEALTH & RECOVERY

Mental health is important to overall well-being. It shapes our thoughts, emotions, and actions, and influences how we navigate life's challenges. In this issue, we share stories that explore the intersection of mental health and recovery, and also provide some resources for the suffering alcoholic.

SHARE YOUR STORY



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Submit Group News, medallions, event notices, letters to the editor and articles to Better Times, before the 10th of the month prior to month of issue by email to bettertimes@aatoronto.org or contact Alexx at 416-487-8110

THE DEVIL ON YOUR SHOULDER

Hello everyone, my name is Doug Mathews and I'm a recovering alcoholic. It's extremely important to my recovery that I use my real name today because of what I stand for and what my long term goal is.

What I've learned through almost 8 years of recovery is that one's mental health is deeply tied to their recovery process.

As stated by SAMHSA, "Mental health includes our emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It affects how we think, feel, and act, and helps determine how we handle stress, relate to others, and make choices".

I know that living recovery out loud is something that's not possible for everyone. Our professions, our relationships or our spiritual paths do not allow for such bold declarations, and as such we fear potential repercussions caused by shame and stigma. But today, I choose to live my recovery out loud for my mental well-being through my Canadian Sober EH! © platform. And as such, I feel that I am starting a movement towards compassion, understanding and acceptance.

I started Canadian Sober EH! © during the COVID pandemic because I was struggling with how to stay sober in a lockdown world. I realized that I wasn't handling the lack of social interaction the rooms of recovery provided and needed an outlet to vent and connect.



The podcast began with examining quotes I'd heard from recovery meetings. I interviewed those who had shared them to gain an understanding of why they resonated with them in the first place. I also shared how the quotes had affected my own recovery. From here, the podcast grew to participants sharing their experience, strength and hope as themselves, not cloaked behind anonymity.

And this is what I have struggled with during recovery...anonymity. I felt that as I navigated my recovery journey and was encouraged to live in secrecy to gain sobriety, my emotional, psychological and social well-being was suffering.

It was almost ironic...I had found myself in the rooms of recovery because I was constantly lying my way out of situations. And now, I was encouraged to keep lying to gain sobriety.

They say when we stop drinking in those first 30 days our "brain fog" dissipates. We see clearly for the first time in a long time. Now, I'll be honest, this "clarity" took years to develop for me.

I didn't scream from the rooftops my first night in recovery that I was in recovery. I was ashamed, I was broken and I wasn't that brave.

But now, almost 8 years later, I'm brave, I'm not ashamed and I'm healing.

— Cont'd on page 04 —

MENTAL HEALTH IS NOT AN OUTSIDE ISSUE, IT IS THE ISSUE

My mental health journey started long before my addiction recovery. But I knew I suffered from both long before. At twelve years old, I diagnosed myself with depression, and by the time I was eighteen, I knew I had addictive and escapist tendencies. But getting help for both was a much more complicated road.

Growing up in a dysfunctional household of children of alcoholics meant that emotional regulation and mental hygiene wasn't a topic of conversation. What WAS a topic of conversation was, "children should be seen and not heard", and "boys don't cry." And even though I was a girl, I got the sense I shouldn't cry either - mainly because I was bullied by my family for being sensitive. And then there were all the things that weren't said, such as not talking about family issues, especially to outsiders. This dysfunction was kept under wraps and a veil of a functional family was what the outside world saw.

When my 'dysfunctions' and disorders started to surface, the "keep quiet" attitude was already deeply ingrained in me. It didn't help that I was pegged as the Golden Child. The straight A student that my mom would show around - Cont'd on page 02 -

as a level of HER functioning. Meanwhile, my brother was taken to a psychiatrist and diagnosed with a learning disability. As a teacher with special education certifications, this also was a sign of my mom's competence. The fuck up and the golden child showed what a capable mom she was. Meanwhile, there was no room for my brother and I to move from these characters given to us. I got straight A's... but was sobbing in the bathroom alone, dragging a razor across my arm. I was an artist, dancer, fair athlete... but I felt terribly alone and out of place.

It wasn't long before other mental health issues started to surface: obsessive compulsive tendencies and anxiety after the height of my brother's physical and psychological abuse. Diligently, I still continued to follow the family code and remained functional for all of high school. University was my liberation, my relief, but with it a chance to rebel, a chance to party, a chance to not be so functional. And how did I do that? By binge drinking and becoming a party girl. Nobody seems to expect much of the frat boys and party girls. I finally got a break from everyone's expectations of me, especially those I had for myself.

But this led to a slow unravel. In fourth year I finally let out all my mental health struggles to a friend on the eve before my birthday. The next day I asked a friend to be on the phone with me when I made one of the scariest calls ever... to the mental health services at my university. At twenty I was finally diagnosed, (by a doctor) with depression and PTSD. I started therapy, in secrecy from my family of course. I was prescribed the usual batch of antidepressants (which you shouldn't drink on, but of course, I drank on.) They didn't help my depression, just kept me dysthymic. This course of antidepressants and talk therapy went on for years to no real improvement, all the while drinking, clearly the core issue wasn't being dealt with.

But then one fateful day, the core issue came knocking. Most would think I am alluding to my bottom, but that is not the case. It was, however, the straw that broke the camel's back and catapulted me off the deep end. It was the day my dad killed my mom and then himself.

While the trauma of such a day is apparent, there are also many layers of trauma that remain invisible to most. One being that an act like my dad's rarely happens in a vacuum.

My mom cheated on him multiple times and emotionally neglected and abused us. While my dad wasn't outright abusive, I can see some controlling aspects of him like when he would put ultimatums on my mom.



All the while, no one went to therapy, my mom not dealing with her deep rooted, multifaceted childhood trauma.

But on that fateful day, the veil of functionality was lifted and the toxic dysfunction came spilling out for the world to see. And it came spilling out of me too. The container of my family was gone. I know longer had to hide... but it also meant I had nothing holding me accountable.

It was my greatest freedom and my greatest fear. I could drink how I liked and drug and not worry about it getting back to my parents to reprimand me. I could be out doing dangerous things with dangerous people until the wee hours of the morning and no one knew. I didn't have to hide my booze from anyone, or my depression and anxiety. My bottoms were never me being caught... they were me, alone in my house, crying in the fetal position with no one knowing how deep I was. I maintain it's the scariest place for an addict to be: when they believe no one loves them and they have nothing to live for.

I was like a zombie for years, with my addiction, anxiety and depression and PTSD getting worse. I was now on a regime of talk therapy, antidepressants and anti-anxiety meds in what I like to call Mental Health Wack-a-Mole. My mental health team would focus on one thing and another popped up. It wasn't until I started having psychogenic non-epileptic seizures that the core issue of all my traumas was taken into consideration. It also coincided with the beginning of the end in terms of my addiction.

The numbing out and escape alcohol offered me wasn't working and I realized I was miserable and alone, drinking or not. Before I would go into my psychiatrist's/therapist's office and just answer, "okay" when asked how I was. - *Cont'd on page 04* -

GTA MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT SERVICES

It's a double whammy - to struggle with alcoholism and to also struggle with mental health challenges. And the public services catering to such individuals are few and far between. It can be a nightmare to find the right service - the right fit. And this is no easy task when one is hurting.

There is, however, a fairly lengthy list of self-help peer support groups in Toronto. And many use the 12 step model of AA. There is Emotions Anonymous, Adult Children of Alcoholics, Al Anon, Obsessive Compulsive Anonymous - just to name a few. It is said there are about 400+ of these groups in the Toronto area alone.

Here is a partial list of some of the groups that you may find helpful.

The Mood Disorder of Ontario holds about 25+ peer groups weekly for people for all backgrounds. They are led by trained volunteers. They also offer one on one counselling services. You must pre-register to attend a meeting. Phone number is (416) 486-8046.

Double Recovery is a 12 step program where members suffering from mental health challenges as well as alcoholism/addictions can connect. There used to be about 6 meetings in Toronto; now it's down to about 2 or 3.

Recovery Inc. now called Recovery Canada is a peer group offering support. No 12-step program or Higher Power here. A lot of their wisdom is common sense. The program helped me.

Many groups have online platforms where you can express your opinions, worries, concerns. Facebook hosts many of these groups. Not quite the same thing as in person.

Finally, "Laughing Like Crazy" is a program where those with mental health challenges learn to perform stand up comedy. There are 16 sessions and members make fun of their illnesses. Then, they perform in front of a live audience with cue cards in hand. The program is said to build members' self esteem.

Ken M



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THE ALKATHON: WHY WE (STILL) DO IT

During the first meeting of our committee back in August, it was suggested this might be the last Winter Season Virtual Alkathon ever.

It's true – most GTA home groups and committees have returned to in-person meetings. Even Intergroup is struggling to conduct local online meetings, despite a widespread belief that COVID is behind us.

What did we do? The committee ignored the comments, buckled down and we pulled off another wildly successful event.



Forty-four meetings over four days involving two distinct fellowships, with an average attendance of 25-30 people per meeting, and most importantly – multiple service opportunities for alcoholics in the home groups of the GTA. Some of them weighed in shortly afterward.

“AA is growing and learning new and creative ways to carry its message while still maintaining its common ground: AA works. The Virtual Alkathon demonstrates this.”

“I enjoyed being a Tech Host. I got to attend other meetings, see different formats and hear some new speakers, all within the convenient location of my living room! What an awesome way to give back what was so freely given to me.”

“This is AA at its best. The Tech Coordinator helped this alcoholic to step outside my comfort zone while fulfilling a worthwhile service role. Thank you.”

“The whole thing ran like clockwork. It was an awesome experience. It was so great to provide a meeting for newcomers, those who struggle during the holidays, and any other AA's. And of course, it kept us sober.”

And there it is, in a nutshell. But it was something someone shared as I chaired the midnight meeting on New Year's Eve which struck me most of all. This fellow had hopped on a few hours earlier and stayed, meeting after meeting, because he was about to go to a bar. Then he thanked us for the Alkathon. That is why we do it. That's the juice.

Shortly after that, at 1:15 AM on January 1st, I realized I had managed to get through the entire holiday season without thinking about taking a drink even once. A warm feeling accompanied the thought which I recognized as gratitude, and personal growth. I thanked my Creator and went to sleep.

Sure, with this event we help carry the message to the still suffering alcoholic at a difficult time of year. We meet the challenge set out in the 5th Tradition of A.A. Perhaps most importantly, the Alkathon provides too many service positions for alcoholics in recovery to be ended. It will be up to Intergroup to decide. Much like our disease, the Winter Season Virtual Alkathon simply evolves, and it will never go away.

Thank you for letting me be of service!

David P.
W.S.V.A. Chair

GTAI/DISTRICT – FEBRUARY SUBCOMMITTEE MEETINGS

Accessibilities - Sun. Jan. 21 – 11 a.m.

ID: 824 8962 1874 - PW: 799763

Archives - Fri. Jan. 12 – 8 p.m.

ID: 841 5376 9412 - PW: 018851

Communications - Tues. Jan. 16 – 8 p.m.

ID: 850 5256 7237 - PW: 984555

CPC/PI - Mon. Jan. 15 – 7 p.m.

ID: 854 7547 0291 - PW: 002060

Correctional Facilities - Tues. Jan. 02 – 7 p.m.

ID: 883 8002 9737 - PW: 950392

Self-Support - **Meets every other month.** Next

Meeting: March 28 - 6:30 pm

ID: 820 9238 0206 - PW: 319853

Treatment - Please contact
treatment@aatoronto.org for more information

Twelfth Step - Wed. Jan. 10 – 7 p.m.

ID: 813 0646 6967 - PW: 572531

IT Subcommittee - Tues. Jan. 09 – 7 p.m.

ID: 814 0942 9019 - PW: 379691

Information AA Day - Mon. Jan. 22 - 7 p.m.

ID: 811 8277 5978 - PW: 587553

FEBRUARY MEDALLIONS

Frank G., Rexdale United Group, 50 yrs., Celebration:
February 22nd, 8 PM

Laure D., Anniversary Group, Scarborough 20 yrs.,
Celebration: February 14th, 7 PM

Patti W., New Anchor Group, 15 yrs (Feb 16th, 2009),
Celebration: February 22nd

Robert T., Friendly Group, 10 yrs. (Feb 4th, 2014),
Celebration: February 26th, 8 PM, Potluck after mtg.

Heidi B., The Fellowship Group, 15 yrs, Celebration:
February 26th, 8 PM

IS THERE AN UPCOMING MEDALLION?

Please send your medallion details to
bettertimes@aatoronto.org
in the format of:

name - homegroup - year(s) of sobriety - medallion
date

Kindly note that Better Times only publishes the
first year of continuous sobriety birthday
celebrations or every subsequent 5th year of
continuous sobriety (i.e. 1, 5, 10, 15, 20...)

ARCHIVES CORNER

Did you Know ?

In February 1939, Dr. Harry Tiebout became the 1st psychiatrist to endorse AA and use AA principles in his practice. In summer 1944, Bill began twice-a-week treatment with Dr. Tiebout for debilitating episodes of depression. Some members were outraged & castigated Bill for "not working the program," "secretly drinking" & "pill taking." Bill endured the attacks in silence.

In February 1940, Larry J. persuaded Allan C. Bartlett, editor of the Houston Press to ran a series of 6 articles about AA that he wrote with an anonymously byline. They were extremely well written & generated much favorable publicity for AA. Larry was a newspaperman & a Cleveland, Ohio member, who nearly died from the dt's & had a lung ailment which required him to spend much time in a oxygen tent. Larry set out from Cleveland by train to live & work in Houston. While on the train he read the Big Book & had a spiritual awakening. He wrote the series of articles after arriving in Houston. The articles became an early AA pamphlet called "AA". Larry who was sponsored by Cleveland AA founder Clarence S., had never previously attended an AA meeting. Larry went on to start AA in Texas.

On Feb. 28, 1942, Bill W. paid tribute to Ruth Hock, AA's first secretary who left the office to marry. Ruth's signature appeared on about 15,000 letters sent in response to inquiries about AA by the New York office.

In February 1943, during WW11 gasoline rationing, the Office of Price Admin. recognized the "importance and social significance of the work done by AA" and granted AA right to use cars for 12th Step work in emergency cases.

On February 7 & 8th, 1948, Bill W. & Lois came to Toronto. Bill spoke on Saturday at Central Technical School to an audience of 800 people in a closed meeting & on Sunday night to 1400 people at an open meeting at the Tivoli Theatre on Richmond St.

On February 2, 1954, Bill W. declined an honorary Doctorate from Yale University.

In February 1959, AA granted Recording for the Blind permission to tape The Big Book.

In February 1963, an article by Arthur Cain, titled "Alcoholics Anonymous - Cult or Cure?" appeared in Harper's magazine. Cain, a psychologist, sharply criticized AA as being "one of America's most fanatical religious cults." In scathing terms, he accused AA of being "pompous, intolerant, dogmatic & anti-science." The immediate reaction of many AA members was indignation, anger & a desire for retaliation. When the demand reached NY for Bill W. & the Board to do "something", Bill recommended they do nothing. He counseled that the best response to criticism was no response & late wrote, "Our critics can be our friends" by forcing us to take a look at our faults.

In February 1981, the first issue of "Markings" the AA Archives newsletter was published. "The function of archives is to give the Fellowship a sense of its own past and the opportunity to study it."

On Feb. 1, 1987, Toronto Intergroup Offices moved from 272 Eglinton Ave. W. to 234 Eglinton Ave. E., Suite 502.

Greater Toronto Area Groups That Started in February

- February 22, 1948 - Lakeshore Group
- February 1962 - Newmarket Group
- February 23, 1963 - Birds of the Feather Group
- February 17, 1969 - Liverpool Group
- February 20, 1974 - Kennedy Park Group
- February 18, 1980 - Start Today Group
- February 11, 1983 - Fellowship Group
- February 14, 1983 - Streetsville Action Group
- February 5, 1986 - Fifth Tradition Group
- February 11, 2015 - Beyond Belief Group (Mississauga)
- February 11, 2015 - Newmarket Freethinkers Group

Mental Health Is Not An Outside issue, it is THE Issue - cont from pg. 1 -

After my seizures I spewed everything out, including my addiction, to my psychiatrist. I was diagnosed with Borderline Personality Disorder and FINALLY he said, "maybe we should look at all your trauma".

Nine months of Dialectic Behavioural Therapy is from where I learned to not only recognize my emotions but to also learn how to deal with them, and my reactions to other people. It did more for me than nine years of talk therapy and antidepressants. And I don't know how I would have made it through my first year of sobriety without it, because booze was how I dealt with and released my emotions. But that was just one layer of my recovery. Proper trauma therapy was the next.

I have been to meetings where some of the long timers say, "just go to meetings, find a sponsor and don't drink", these are also invariably the same ones who complain when a speaker talks about their childhood trauma or how they are currently dealing with an abuser as an "outside issue". I am here to say, it is not an outside issue. Mental health is not an outside issue, therapy is not an outside issue, trauma is not an outside issue, medication is not an outside issue. Any other comorbidity or addiction one has is not an outside issue. Because it all has to do with what goes on inside of us, and what goes on inside of is always the issue that leads us to a drink. Alcohol is the issue outside of us that we use to deal with what's on the inside.

Chelsea A., Lakeshore Group

The Devil On Your Shoulder - cont from pg. 1 -

Alcohol is the devil on your shoulder. It convinces you that you need it more than it needs you. It twists and turns your thoughts against you and turns you into someone who don't recognize. But when you choose sobriety, you choose positive mental health.

Drug toxicity, alcohol abuse, a rise in youth mental health, are issues that Simcoe County is struggling with as we enter 2024. By sharing others' stories of experience, strength and hope, Canadian Sober EH! © has become a beacon of hope for those not only in recovery but for those who are sober-curious or those who love the suffering addict. At the end of the day, I want to eradicate the fear that lives within us. The fear that our lives will end the minute we admit we are powerless over our addiction.

This is simply a myth. I'm living proof of that. My life did not end the day I asked for help. It simply began.

Doug Mathews

TO DONATE AA/GTA ARCHIVAL ITEMS TO ARCHIVES PLEASE CONTACT
ARCHIVIST EDDY G. 416-536-7536 or archives@aatoronto.org
OLD GTA MEETING BOOKS ARE NEEDED FOR THE ARCHIVES.