

Let's Talk campaign targeted stigma surrounding mental illness

By Tabitha Wells

Millions of Canadians across Canada joined up with Bell Media this week to break the stigma surrounding mental health and mental illness in Canada.

Let's Talk, a campaign started in 2010, encouraged Bell customers to call and text as much as possible, and all Canadians to tweet and use Facebook to help raise money toward mental health awareness and research.

The campaign was simple. On Bell Let's Talk Day Tuesday, for every tweet, phone call, text message and Facebook share of their campaign photo, Bell donated five cents to the program.

"It's important because mental health and mental illness is a seriously underfunded yet highly common health issue," said Bell Let's Talk Chair Mary Deacon. "Much more needs to be done and talking about mental health is the first step towards eliminating the stigma. That's what Bell Let's Talk is all about."

The idea came during an evaluation of community investment activities across Canada. It was clear that mental illness was not receiving the same depth of corporate help and sponsorship as other health care issues, and the team thought something needed to be done.

"We decided to step up and really try to use the strength of the Bell brand and our resources to not only address the stigma, but make investments in mental health organizations across the country that typically do not receive the same funding as other health issues," Deacon commented.

Recent studies have shown that one in five Canadians will suffer from some form of mental health issues during their lifetime, which is a staggering one fifth of our population.

"There should be no shame in talking about these issues," said Gloria Campbell, program manager of Children's Mental Health at Dufferin Child and Family Services (DCAFS). "The more people that talk about this, the more we are working to reduce the shame and the stigma surrounding mental health challenges. It's great to see corporate organizations really get behind these campaigns."

In 2012, RBC along with DCAFS teamed up to bring Bell Let's Talk representative and Canadian Olympian Clara Hughes to speak at Orangeville District Secondary School (ODSS) to the community about her own struggle with mental health, as well as the challenges faced by many Canadians.

"It's great that high-profile individuals like Clara Hughes are a part of that, because it really helps to normalize it when people realize high profile individuals also have mental health issues and depressive disorders," Campbell added. "It just makes it more comfortable, more out there, and help make it more acceptable."

DCAFS acts as one of the local strongholds for mental health and mental health awareness, offering a daily crisis service for children, youth and families who are at risk of suicide, self-harm or harming others, or have attempted suicide and self-harm. The program works hand-in-hand with Headwaters Health Care Centre, who notifies DCAFS when they have received a troubled youth at the hospital.

"At any point we have two youth in hospital somewhere," she explained. "There are no psychiatric beds at our hospital, so individuals are transferred from either emerge or pediatrics to hospitals in the city. When they are going to be released we connect again and provide ongoing, continued support."

Along with other services they provide, DCAFS also backs a student-led initiative called Shed the Light, where students share their own stories and situations about their struggles with mental health.

"Our goal is to reduce the stigma so that people are not afraid to ask for help, and we can help people feel more comfortable seeking help," explained Shed the Light Coordinator Tina Pryce. "The more education that people have on the subject the more capable they are to reach out. Youth are more responsive to hearing and being educated by other youth when it comes to mental health as opposed to hearing it from an adult. They're more apt to listen and relate."

The importance of having mental health awareness and help in the community is apparent through the number of people who respond to the options available at DCAFS. Generally, they will have around 10 people in attendance at their weekly Talk-In clinics, as well as 20 to 25 youth attending their LGBTQ support group.

Deacon added that it's these kinds of groups that Bell Let's Talk looks to help fund, because they are where the biggest strength lies in breaking the stigma.

"This is something that is having the greatest impact at the community level," she said. "We investments in grass roots community organizations that are at the front lines of making a difference in their communities every day."

The campaign has been growing exponentially every year, allowing Bell the opportunity to pour more finances and resources into

raising awareness and helping communities grow their capabilities to reach their local residents. In 2012 there were 26,000 tweets sent during the campaign, and by 2013, that number grew to 1.5 million, and combined with the other facets of it, led to a 4.8 million dollar donation from Bell.

"This year we are looking to break the \$5-million threshold," explained Deacon. "For each one of those events, it causes Bell to donate more money, so the more people that talk, text, Facebook and tweet, the more Bell donates."

So far, Bell's total investment in mental health and the initiative stands at \$62 million dollars, up from the initial \$50 million that was contributed before the first Let's Talk Day in 2010. They were hoping that this year, they will be able to get close to or surpass \$70 million through people participating this week.

"The biggest challenge we have around mental health is stigma, so getting it out in the open and talking about it is really the first step," said Deacon. "We need to be advocating on the behalf of people with mental health issues and advocating on their behalf about the difficulty getting mental health services. We need to use our voice as Canadians to really see a change in the issue of stigma."

For more information on the Bell Let's Talk Campaign, visit Bell.ca/LetsTalk

To find out more about DCAFS Children's Mental Health services that are offered, visit www.dcafs.on.ca