

Brainstorm

A reflection of our community

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UNITY

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Mental illness seminar is designed to help family and friends cope

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To help recognize Mental Health Week, Mount Royal College (MRC) and Brainstorm Fundamentals Inc. will be presenting a seminar to help families and friends deal with mental illness in a loved one.

And one of the Brainstorm Fundamentals facilitators of the seminar — entitled From Tragedy to Triumph: Supporting a Loved One with Mental Illness — knows her subject well.

The seminar will help celebrate the strength of families and friends, who can empower themselves through knowledge and planning. Disaster management and damage control will also be covered, as will maintaining one's own health, rebuilding damaged relationships and averting future disasters.

"That's the thing, having a plan — that's such a stress reliever," said seminar co-facilitator Wendy Dixon, a psychiatric nurse with a family history of schizophrenia who, with partner Pia Elliot, founded Brainstorm Fundamentals.

Dixon's experience with mental illness has been nearly lifelong. When she was 13 and her brother 17, he was diagnosed with schizophrenia. Dixon and her family made the effort to inform themselves about the illness — what it is and how to manage it — and began to look ahead to the future with a focus on family recovery.

"The family and the individual are the experts," Dixon said. "They know ... what they're observing."

Six years ago, Dixon herself was diagnosed with schizophrenia and she was placed in a psychiatric facility. Although she needed help to stabilize her disorder, thanks to education and proper medication, Dixon recovered to become a fully integrated, productive member of society.

"During the whole process, I knew how to recover because I had studied it all my life," she said. "I was able to be an informed consumer."

Turning her experience to good use, Dixon is hoping to use Brainstorm, Mental Health Week and the seminar to enlighten the public about mental illness and break some of the stigmas attached.

"The biggest problem is stigma-busting," she said. "People are just ignorant about the brain and how to heal the brain."

"We're still trying to overcome (historical misconceptions)," she added.

Brainstorm Fundamentals is an outreach management company which strives to connect with people in the community who are mentally ill and their families.

"It was one year ago that we actually opened the business as recovery coaches," Dixon said, adding that she and Elliot, who is also in the psychiatric nursing field and has experienced mental illness, are breaking ground in private health care because they see a need for their type of service.

"The entire mental health system had no capability of going into a home," she said.

One of the key initial pieces of the mental health puzzle is to ensure a mental illness sufferer receives competent care. Following through with management of the disease is also important, as is continuing education.

As more people begin to speak openly about their own experience with mental illness, Dixon is hoping the trend continues.

"That's such a healthy, liberating thing to do," she said.

Being able to offer her own strength and that of others who have experienced mental illness has been of benefit in establishing Brainstorm Fundamentals.

"We're really working on getting peer specialists involved," she said.

From Tragedy to Triumph will run Oct. 19, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., or Oct. 18 and Oct. 25, 6:30-9:30 p.m., or Oct. 20 and Oct. 27, 6:20-9:30 p.m. The cost is \$125. To register or for more information, call Wendy Dixon or Pia Elliot at 730-6339.