

MARGARET TRUDEAU – “Changing My Mind”

Keynote speaker at the 2010 BCSCA Conference

She didn't appear to be “crazy” at all as the press had portrayed her in the stories of her shenanigans as wife of Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau in the past. In fact, she was absolutely delightful as we reminisced about her mother's bridge club of which my mother-in-law had been a part in the '60s. She said, “We (she and her 4 sisters) always loved the days Mum had the bridge club over because the food was so good.”

Her message to us was one of hope for those who struggle with or have loved ones who struggle with mental illness. She wants to communicate that help is available if they will admit they need help and that once they get the help, they can come out the other side.

She was raised in a family of five girls to be a pleasing little girl. Her parents never fought so she learned that you didn't express your emotions. In order to gain her parents' love and approval, she became skilled at suppressing her feelings. This later developed into her depression which was her anger turned inward. Not being allowed to articulate her feelings, she felt she had no voice.

It was during her years at Simon Fraser University where she was studying sociology that she began to feel an imbalance in her mind. She was introduced to marijuana that seemed to counteract her imbalance. Thus she began to self-medicate with the drug and its usage became a way of life. Unbeknownst to her, the marijuana was a trigger that pushed her into her episodes.

At the age of 20 she was diagnosed with bipolar disorder. When first confronted with her diagnosis, she put on a performance of denial – the first stage in the bipolar process. She wasn't ready to accept the diagnosis and blame became a way of rationalizing behaviour that made no sense to anyone.

She met Pierre Trudeau while water skiing at a Club Med. They spent three hours together on a raft discussing a variety of topics. She had no idea that as a result of these discussions he'd picked her to be his wife.

After travelling in Morocco for awhile she came back to Canada. Drug use during her travels had exacerbated her mental illness. When Pierre came courting, they kept it quiet as she wasn't comfortable with the lifestyle it entailed. At age 22 she became Pierre's wife. She didn't understand the role she'd taken on in marrying him and becoming the wife of the Prime Minister of Canada.

She felt isolated at 24 Sussex Drive which she calls the “Crown Jewel of the Canadian Penitentiary system.” After the birth of her second child, she fell into a deep depression. Pierre wanted to get help for her and took her to a psychiatrist who was more interested in talking to Pierre than to her and patted her hand and told her it was just the “baby blues”.

When she was out of depression she went into mania. She acted out in this phase with no idea why she was doing so or what was causing it. The mania caused compulsivity and feelings of extraordinary power. It was during one of these episodes that she decided to separate from Pierre yet still be his wife but not the wife of the Prime Minister. She felt that in order for her to survive she needed to leave to find out who she was and what she could do.

She went to New York to study photography. While there, she met and became friends with many celebrities. It was during a photo shoot of a Rolling Stones' concert that caused the scandal that led the Trudeaus to finally separate. She would return to her children at 24 Sussex Drive but never to take her role as Canada's First Lady.

While in New York she met a psychiatrist at a dinner party who convinced her to let him help her. He put her on lithium which had a grounding effect that allowed her to take responsibility for her children and return to them in Ottawa. She and Pierre lived in separate houses. He was Leader of the Opposition at the time and lived in Stornaway and she was able to put a deposit on a home down the street with an advance from her book of memoirs.

She met Fried Kemper on a ski trip with her boys in the Laurentians. Pierre, being Catholic, would never agree to a divorce so Fried moved in with her and the boys. When Margaret got pregnant with Kemper's child, Pierre agreed to a divorce allowing her and Fried to marry. They had a son and daughter and life was good until Fried had to declare bankruptcy. At the same time, Margaret had a miscarriage and a number of close friends died. She developed excruciating pain in her neck and was diagnosed with fibromyalgia. This was an illness that came from the mind not the body and the referred pain was from its mental cause and depression.

During a skiing trip with an old friend her mania took over causing her to ski recklessly and fall, hurting her knee. Her friend and family used the ruse of her injured knee to trick her into going to the hospital and committing her to the psychiatric ward of St. Paul's Hospital in Vancouver where she stayed for two and a half months. Upon release she returned to Ottawa and met the psychiatrist who helped her along to recovery.

Then her son, Michel, died in an avalanche. She was able to mask her feelings and her illness from those close to her so no one knew how she was affected by first the death of Michel and later the death of Pierre. She kept her grief from Justin and Sacha. She knows now it was wrong not to let them know how she was truly feeling. With the assistance of a friend she got help and found her way to an aboriginal group who helped her heal her grief. She had been hanging onto her son and they helped her to let him go.

Soon after Pierre died, her marriage to Kemper ended in divorce and she turned again to self-medicating with marijuana triggering her depression once more. She was hospitalized again. She got the right doctor this time and the right medication. Through five years of cognitive behavioural therapy she learned to change her way of thinking.

She learned to reach out and ask for help. Now she is sharing her experience with others and raising awareness of mental health issues.

Counsellors need to let kids know they can reach out and talk about what's going on in their lives. Denial and blame keep people from getting help. They blame everyone and everything to avoid taking responsibility for themselves. They need help learning how to live with their limitations, know their boundaries and triggers. They need to know that casual experimentation with drugs can be devastating and damage can be irreparable. Counsellors need to explain to kids about how a healthy brain gives us a wonderful life and by doing drugs they destroy their lives.

Accepting the diagnosis of an acute mental illness is similar to the stages of the grief process in accepting a death:

Stage One – Denial – a refusal to accept that what has happened has anything to do with you

Stage Two – Bargaining – maybe it will all work out if I do such and such

Stage Three – Depression/self-pity – why me? What did I do to deserve this?

Stage Four – Anger – what's wrong with everyone?

Stage Five – Acceptance – this is happening to me and I am responsible for my recovery.

It's not until people with mental illness embrace Stage 5 and they take responsibility that true healing takes place. Margaret Trudeau's healing continues as she tells her story and brings her message of hope and her recovery to the world.

Thank you, Margaret for your courage in sharing your message with us.

Joanell Clarke
Retired Past President