

Published date October 05, 2020

Interview with Caroline Fei-Yeng Kwok

Meet one of the new Faces of Mental Illness

Each year as part of [Mental Illness Awareness Week](#), the Canadian Alliance on Mental Health and Mental Illness (CAMIMH) announces a new group of [Faces of Mental Illness](#) to share their stories during the campaign and throughout the year ahead.

We had the chance to speak with one of this year's Faces, Caroline Fei-Yeng Kwok, about her experience with mental illness after immigrating to Canada and her path to recovery. Caroline now helps others who face similar challenges by sharing her story and passion for writing through presentations and workshops.

As a new immigrant, what were some of the challenges you faced with accessing mental health care?

When I was an in-patient, most care providers did not seem to understand me as a person. They did not know my culture and did not realize that with my Asian background, it was very hard for me to talk about feelings, to confide in strangers, or to trust psychiatric institutions.

Social stigma was an important factor as well. My mother didn't know how to handle mental illness and couldn't access support herself due to language barriers. She considered my bipolar disorder to be shameful and she asked me to never speak of my illness. Like many new immigrants, I also didn't have a solid understanding of Toronto's mental health care system or psychiatric medications.

What supports have led to your present recovery?

The empowerment model of recovery has played an important role in my life. This model encourages belief in your own strength, the pursuit of your dreams and social connection with peers. My psychiatrist saw my aspirations to be a writer not as grandiose thoughts, but a chance to reclaim the freedom and independence I lost in hospitals.

I took a creative writing course at Yale University and eventually wrote 2 books, *Journeys of Renewed Hope* and *Free to Fly: A Story of Manic Depression*. My writing has helped my mental health and promoted what I truly believe – that mental illness can affect people from all walks of life and all age levels, but recovery is possible. My openness about mental health through my writing and presentations across North America and Asia has built relationships with old friends, new friends and strangers who read my work and can relate.

You were a program provider to people of colour at a mental health centre in Toronto. How do these peer-led spaces build connections for people experiencing isolation?

Many of the clients I worked with suffered racial discrimination as in-patients or out-patients. Some were immigrants or refugees who felt isolated and unsupported. The centre provided them with programming that made them feel safe and provided a place for them to socialize and make friends.

This helped them break down the barrier of loneliness and build their confidence and identity.

The theme for this year's Mental Illness Awareness Week is "there is no health without mental health." What does that mean to you?

As a survivor and mental health advocate, I advise mental health organizations to develop outreach programs to educate the public about symptoms of mental illness, especially depression and anxiety, and their relationship with physical health. As well, I always encourage all those who are prone to mental illness to never deny their feelings. It is important to promote openness about mental illness and education about recovery.

If you're interested in learning more about Caroline's writing or purchasing one of her books, please email workplacehealth@bell.ca.

For videos, biographies and more information about the campaign, please visit CAMIMH.ca.