



Doctor uses art to overcome depression

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Three decades after Dr. Michael Pare turned his life around after attempting suicide and being admitted to hospital in a coma, he wants others with mental illness to embrace the help and hope that treatment provides.

"The irony, of course, is people who have that sense of (wanting to commit) suicide want to end things because they don't think they can get better. But the irony is, there is treatment," said the North York physician and medical psychotherapist.

"They could be only weeks away from feeling better."

As part of his attempts to wipe out the stigma attached to mental illness, Pare is participating in the Touched By Fire art show hosted by the Mood Disorders Association of Ontario at the Royal Ontario Museum on Thursday, Nov. 26.

His piece, titled Paranoia in Suits and Ties, features three individuals in business attire with their heads replaced by large eyeballs. Pare describes the picture as "surrealistic and provocative."

Ever since he was a child, Pare has turned to art as a way of staying "somewhat sane." He spent hours drawing fantasy worlds, finding an escape from his sense of urgency, worry and pressure.

Throughout school, he had trouble academically and socially.

"Life didn't seem to work for me," he said.

"That is one the reasons I'm spilling the beans on myself. I want to deal with the stigma (of mental illness). I suspect if I got help sooner, I wouldn't have got severe depressive disorder. I didn't realize how bad it was."

His world fell apart in his early 20s while he was a pre-med student.

He was consumed with despair, self-loathing and a sense his life was falling apart,

"I hid it pretty well because the stigma. Rather than think I have an illness, I thought I couldn't survive or I don't know how to live. I didn't want to admit I didn't know how to live. It was embarrassing," Pare said.

"I didn't even recognize it as an illness, which is amazing because I was taking psychology."

At the age of 23, he took an overdose of muscle relaxant pills and was admitted to hospital in a coma.

"When people are suicidal, there is so much pain. They're not thinking, except to get rid of the pain. It is the psychological equivalent of physically being on fire," Pare said.

Fortunately he survived through medical and psychiatric help.

He was able to recover from his darkest moments through anti-depressant medication and individual and group psychotherapy.

Pare initially believed he was at fault when he failed to make rapid progress with his first therapist, saying he now encourages people with mental illnesses to keep searching for a caregiver that works for them.

Pare, who went on to earn his medical license, a degree in psychology, a masters degree in neuroscience and a masters degree in education, is a medical psychotherapist who treats patients suffering from emotional disorders.

He has not been clinically depressed for more than 25 years.

"I have been reasonably mentally healthy. But it could always come back. So, I go out of my way to get maintenance therapy once a week for 25 years," he said.

Married with a 17-year-old daughter, Pare said becoming a born-again Christian has also contributed to his mental health.

Despite his recovery and treatment of patients, it is only recently that he has been willing to speak publicly about his recovery from depression.

"One of the reasons I decided to talk about it, I was telling patients (their illness) was a disorder, you should be able to talk about it, you aren't disclosing something horrendously bad about yourself. I wasn't doing that myself," he said. "I'm a leader within my field. I'm doing what leaders often do, which is do something different. It is a horrible illness and suffering, that is the reality. But what I want a take-home message to be is there is hope and there is treatment."

The Touched by Fire art show was developed three years ago in memory of an artist named Rebecca Burghardt, who lost her battle with bipolar disorder. All proceeds from the sale of the art goes directly to the artists.

For more information, visit www.touchedbyfire.ca or www.mooddisorders.ca or call 416-486-8046.

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