

Medications not the only way to treat mental health

I attended a public talk in Ottawa recently by Margaret Trudeau, in which she spoke about her mental health problems and associated treatment.

Although Trudeau's comments were often quite entertaining, she presented herself as an enthusiastic spokeswoman for medications and a biased proponent of a narrow bio-medical model as the only legitimate source of treatment for mental health problems.

Although medications sometimes are a necessary component for treating mental health difficulties (especially with diagnoses like Trudeau's bipolar disorder), they typically have many negative side effects and can be very costly over time.

Furthermore, this bio-medical perspective fails to address the omnipresent psychological complexity of mental health issues, as encapsulated in a more comprehensive and much more valid bio-psycho-social-cultural model of mental health.

Without "going upstream" with well-guided psychological therapy to address the many contributing factors to most mental health disorders — including negative behaviours and thoughts, lack of well-understood assertiveness, imbalance between reason and emotion, dysfunctional relationships, childhood trauma and neglect — pharmacological medications alone only suppress symptoms and don't address the underlying root causes, and thus don't offer a cure.

These concerns are particularly troublesome given the astounding statistic that Canada is the most medicated country in the world, accord-

ing to research published by the Centre for Addictions and Mental Health in 2009. Apparently, as Canadians, we are only too glad to freely and uncritically ingest pills by the truckload via the multitudes of written prescriptions that are given out.

To her credit, Trudeau was appropriately critical of the grossly exaggerated claims of genetic contributions to mental health problems (and thus the underemphasized influence of one's past and present environments), and she did mention the salutary effects of good exercise, diet and sleep to mental health.

Importantly, a balanced perspective on the source and solution to mental health problems will insightfully recognize the bi-directional relationship between stress and brain chemistry and mood. Whereas Trudeau emphasized the positive effects that drugs can have on mood, and the "great" hope of the most recent medical magic bullet, exorbitantly expensive brain-imaging technology, she failed to mention that stress associated with trauma, poor relationships, and unhealthy lifestyles negatively affect biochemistry and thus mental health.

As with all things in life, "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure," and truly empowered and health-conscious Canadians would be well-advised to change their ways of coping, their relationships, and their lifestyles — without or with professional psychological help — in order to promote better mental health and to enjoy greater quality of life.

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