

An Ongoing Journey to Raise Awareness

Mel Thompson dipped his wheels into the Atlantic Ocean a year and a half ago, marking the end of The Ride for Mental Health, only to realize that it was just the beginning.

SOPHIE TOLIAS

One in five Canadians will experience a mental illness in their lifetime. The remaining four will have a family member, friend, or colleague who will. Yet it remains one of the least talked-about diseases.

It's the stigma attached to the disease that keeps people from openly discussing their illness and even seeking help. And stigma is the reason their family members carry this heavy secret through daily life.

With this in mind, Mel Thompson cycled from Vancouver to St. John's, aiming to bring forward the issues of mental illness, debunk the myths and misconceptions, and get people to share their stories.

His inspiration?

"Lindsay," he says.

Lindsay, his eldest of four children, was 17 years old when she was diagnosed with schizoaffective disorder.

"Everything changed," she says. "I went from having friends, going to school, doing homework, to having no friends, not really going to school, [and] being in the hospital."

The realities of the disorder, characterized by the shifts from mania to depression associated with bipolar disorder and the presence of hallucinations, delusions, and paranoia associated with schizophrenia, overwhelmed the family.

Lindsay struggled to come to terms with her illness and cope with the regimen of medications and their side effects. Her parents struggled through hospitalizations and family crises, devastated as they watched their daughter's dreams slip away.

For years they did this — in silence.

"We hadn't really talked about our family situation and mental illness with others," Mel says.

Until the ride.

Mel, then 60 years old, was looking to participate in a *Tour du Canada* ride. But as the family discussed how to turn their struggle into something positive, plans changed.

"We decided we're going to do [the ride] as a family ... for mental health," Mel says.

On their 100-day journey, the family raised awareness, fought stigma, and raised \$225,000 to support mental health programs across Canada.

Carol, Mel's wife, drove the support vehicle and Lindsay rode sections of the route whenever

possible. Strangers often followed them.

"They would invariably want to tell their story," says Carol, many of them sharing their story for the first time.

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Sixteen awareness events were held across the country. And even though Lindsay's medication wasn't alleviating her symptoms, she told her story at each one.

"It was inspiring, and very courageous," Mel says.

"I wanted to represent everybody who had a mental illness," Lindsay says. "I wanted to stand up there and show people."

Since the ride, Lindsay has found medication that works well for her. She has published articles telling her story and speaks to groups of people being trained to work with mental illnesses patients.

"The ride was pretty pivotal for me," she says. "Being out there and hearing other people's stories and [...] having the time to reflect on my own past and my own experiences."



Lindsay and Mel Thompson during their Ride for Mental Health across Canada

Since the ride they've helped organize The Ride for Mental Health in Vancouver, Play Ball for Mental Health in St. John's, The Xerox Charity Golf Tournament in Toronto, and The SENSational Ride for Mental Health in partnership with the Ottawa Senators.

The ride may be over, but for Lindsay's family it was the beginning — a coming-out, where by sharing their experience, they hope to encourage others to do the same.

"Our hope is that we can help people gain a higher level of understanding and acceptance of mental illness," Carol wrote in a *Thrive in Life* article.

"There is no cure for mental illness. However, there is hope and recovery," Lindsay writes in the

same article. "Everybody deserves a place where they can function within society and feel good about themselves and their contribution to those around them."

For more information or to donate visit www.therideformentalhealth.org.



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