

Promoting Mental Wellness at Work

In conversation with Tonia Jahshan

President and Founder,  Sipology[™]
by Steeped Tea



MENTAL HEALTH WEBINAR SHARES SUCCESS, INSIGHTS AND OPPORTUNITIES

Participants attending a free, lunchtime webinar hosted by Progress Place and The Rotary Club of Toronto on February 24 heard about the importance of mental health wellness in the workplace, as well as the challenges and successes experienced by a group of panelists who have struggled with their own mental health issues.

The “Mental Wellness at Work” fireside chat was held in lieu of Progress Place’s annual, “Taking care of Business” breakfast. A total of 175 people tuned into the online event.

Moderated by former ABC news anchor and former Progress Place board member Hilary Brown, the webinar featured keynote speaker Tonia Jahshan, President and Founder of Sipology by Steeped Tea. Other panelists included yoga and meditation instructor and life coach Jane Lee, and Progress Place member Sophia Morgage.

Success and Struggles

Keynote speaker Jahshan spoke about the challenges and rewards of starting her own successful company, which grew

quickly from a tiny operation to a multi-million-dollar company. She explained that the pressures of the growing business, combined with the toll of suffering two miscarriages and not taking care of herself, led her into a dark place.

Following treatment, she was determined to open up and share her experience to help others, especially within her company – and to help break down the stigma associated with mental illness.

“My mental health was the last priority on my plate...By 2018, I hit rock bottom,” the entrepreneur recalled. When she started having suicidal thoughts, she recognized it was time to seek help. She checked into a hospital and kept her six-week stay a secret from everyone but her husband.

Following treatment, she was determined to open up and share her experience to help others, especially within her company – and to help break down the stigma associated with mental illness.

Jahshan said she shared her experiences with her employees and consultants and was impressed with the level of support and acceptance she experienced.

“Everybody has an issue. Everybody has some sort of mental health problem, whether you yourself have a mental health problem, or you know someone who does, everybody in their life is affected by it. The more we talk about it, the better it’s going to be for people... Silence is a trap,” she explained.

Jahshan continues to encourage her colleagues to talk about their own mental health issues. “Giving people a platform to talk is one of the most important things I do here,” she said.

Transforming Experience

Fellow panelist Jane Lee, who has been offering free, virtual yoga and meditation sessions online to Progress Place members during the COVID-19 pandemic, spoke about her own mental and physical health challenges and how she transformed her life to help others live healthier and happier lives.

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NEW STUDY PUBLISHED IN THE CANADIAN MENTAL HEALTH JOURNAL HIGHLIGHTS CLUBHOUSE ADAPTATIONS AND MEMBER CHALLENGES DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Findings from a recently published study demonstrate how Progress Place and other Canadian clubhouses quickly adapted their programs and services to meet members' mental health and functional needs during the COVID-19 pandemic – needs that would otherwise not have been met by other services.

Conducted by the Canadian Clubhouse Research Group, the study involved key stakeholders from six, accredited clubhouses across the country to create and share an overview of best practices in response to the pandemic.

Clubhouse staff, members and directors were invited to participate in remote interviews or fill out online questionnaires.

Major challenges identified by members as a result of the pandemic included: increased mental health symptoms, including anxiety and depression; isolation and loneliness; concerns about access to services – including food, transportation, medication and mental health services; and major disruptions to daily routines, especially the work-ordered day.

Adaptations & Innovations

To meet these challenges, clubhouses implemented a number of changes, including the expansion of meal programs to include delivery of meals, food hampers and groceries to members, as well as providing meals for pickup, all allowing for face to face wellness checks.

They also increased communication by providing more newsletters, as well as enhanced phone outreach to members and extended access to helplines. The hours for the Progress Place Warm Line, for example, were expanded significantly from 12 noon to 12 midnight. Study participants noted that consistency in these outreach efforts was most important in keeping members motivated and connected.

Technology

The study found that clubhouses harnessed a wide range of technology platforms to help fill in gaps caused by COVID-19, including offering continued connection to clubhouse meetings and activities via Facebook, Zoom and Slack. These tools provided members with access to social recreation, participation in the work-ordered day and to various health and wellness programs.

Some clubhouses reported that members were getting involved in activities they may not have taken part in previ-

ously. Several reported that the adaptations and innovations in response to COVID-19 resulted in better programming and higher levels of engagement.

Other Challenges Remain

Study findings point out that some clubhouse members had technological challenges, in terms of access to the internet or devices such as smart phones, tablets or laptops. For some others who had access, the ability to navigate different media platforms also posed a challenge. Members who were tech savvy adapted quickly and, in some cases, there was increased attendance in activities, demonstrating that there are new and innovative ways to engage some members.

There were also challenges in reopening the clubhouses when initial lockdowns eased. These included limiting the time members could spend in the clubhouse and requiring them to book their on-site time in advance. Another challenge was prioritizing who would be allowed to come into the clubhouse first, a significant shift from clubhouse standards.



Progress Place's expanded meal program in action.

Going Forward

Clubhouses reported that offering parallel streams of in-person and virtual programming would continue. Technology and in-person programming will both play essential roles in allowing clubhouse members to create social support networks, feel a sense of belonging and decrease mental health concerns.

Although the way services are delivered may be evolving, as long as the clubhouses are guided by their core principles and recovery-oriented standards, members will continue to have their needs met.

RECOVERY IN A NEW LANDSCAPE: BRANDON'S STORY

Hi my name is Brandon Kwong. I have been a member of the Progress Place Clubhouse since early 2017 and an active participant in the Café Unit during that time. Initially Progress Place was a step in my recovery journey after being discharged from the hospital. I knew something had to change in my life at the time and more support was needed. What I did not know is how much the clubhouse would benefit me during my time there. For me, Progress Place is about opportunities to be part of a network of support that improves the lives of people living with mental health challenges. I started small by just showing up to the Clubhouse. It helped me get away from the isolation I felt at home. As time went on and my confidence increased, I got involved in more activities. My personal confidence has improved now, I used to be withdrawn from society, shy and thought of myself as a broken person. Now after around four years of attendance, as well as Transitional Employment opportunities through Progress Place, I am confident to take responsibility for my life. I am no longer the victim but the victor.



“ The Clubhouse virtual space is exciting and vibrant. It gives me the opportunity to connect with familiar faces. ”

“ The pivoting of programming during COVID-19 helped me maintain what I worked so hard to get back at Progress Place pre-COVID-19 – my confidence. ”

When COVID-19 happened in March of 2020 and with the related lockdowns that followed, I was apprehensive. I had spent four years at the clubhouse attending the work-ordered day and Evening Weekend Program. I was fearful of losing all the progress I had made at the clubhouse during the time I had been there. My clubhouse worker was supportive and assured me that Progress Place would be adapting to the changing COVID-19 situation by offering meal pick-up, virtual programming and outreach. I initially came to pick-up meals and connect with members and staff while maintaining physical distance. It really helped pass what I initially thought would be a short-term thing. I was scared of the isolation staying at home brought and the mental health challenges that follow, so being able to access Clubhouse support on a daily basis was so important. I also had the opportunity to work during this time with the Waterfront BIA. I was so grateful to have had that opportunity and felt safe with the protocols that were put in place.

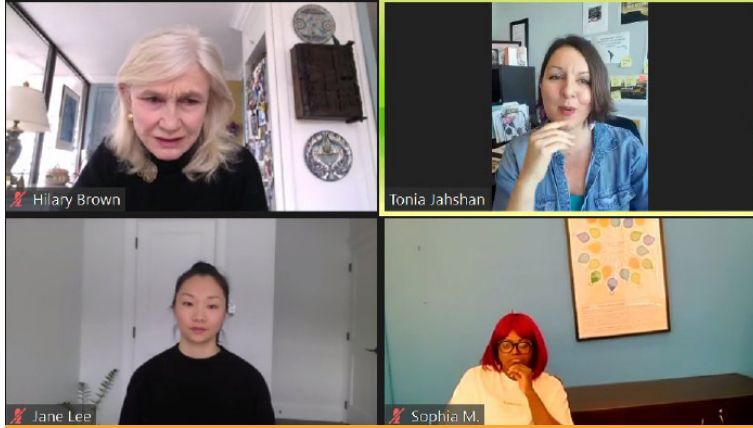
Now the reason I get up early and have been able to keep a routine has been due in part to the virtual meetings. The

Clubhouse virtual space is exciting and vibrant, and it gives me the opportunity to connect with familiar faces. I attend multiple meetings during the week but my favorite are the Monday Morning House Meeting, Café Unit Meeting, Health and Wellness, and Employment Meetings. I was building momentum with my independent employment search pre-COVID-19 due to the confidence I gained through Transitional Employment. I was thrilled to hear that the Clubhouse adapted to the employment needs of members during the lockdowns by providing individual virtual one-on-one help in conjunction to the weekly employment virtual session. This gave me the opportunity to continue to explore ways to improve my resume, interview skills and readiness for work. With the virtual programming, I found motivation to keep active with daily activities and keep a routine.

On top of connecting with Progress Place virtually, the Clubhouse reaches out to me weekly. I really appreciate being able to connect one-on-one with staff, especially during this time.

Progress Place has been indispensable during the lockdowns. I know the despair and hopelessness that can come with isolation and I have experienced it in the past. The holiday season was particularly difficult this year. I found myself connecting with the Warm Line on more than one occasion. I'm very grateful for the extended hours of the Warm Line that made it possible to connect during the day. Now, with the support from Progress Place through outreach and virtual meetings, I feel less isolation. In the past, I had a tendency to withdraw from social interaction into myself. This led to depression and lack of self-esteem and an overall sense of isolation. I have to work on my social skills constantly by connecting with others to be able to overcome the feelings of social inadequacy that come with being unconnected. The virtual programs and outreach are vital to me staying connected. The pivoting of programming during COVID-19 helped me maintain what I worked so hard to get back at Progress Place pre-COVID-19 – my confidence.

MENTAL HEALTH WEBINAR SHARES SUCCESS, INSIGHTS AND OPPORTUNITIES, CONTINUED



Panelists share experiences and insights. Clockwise from top left: Moderator Hillary Brown, Keynote Speaker Tonia Jahshan, Progress Place Member Sophia Morgage, and Yoga and Meditation Instructor and Life Coach, Jane Lee.

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Lee explained that she had spent most of her career in the corporate world of digital marketing and despite her continued success in her field, she was unhappy, always chasing the next big job.

Then, on the cusp of landing what she had assumed was her corporate dream job, she was completely blindsided by a cancer diagnosis. "I was in shock for a while," she recalled.

Experienced in yoga and meditation, Lee dove deeper into meditation practice on a daily basis prior to and following her surgery, treatment and recovery. "It helped me tremendously," she says.

And it was during this time, that she recognized her greatest satisfaction came from helping people – through coaching and mentoring and teaching yoga. She knew it was time to make a career change. "I stopped caring that my job title was defining my worth."

She has no regrets and now operates PureLee Jane Yoga and Meditation.

Seeing the Future

Panelist and Progress Place member Sophia Morgage spoke about her experiences and the challenges she faced after being diagnosed with a mental health issue. After months of disorientation and the inability to sleep, she sought help and spent time in a hospital.

After a few medication lapses, she began to take her medication regularly and learned about Progress Place.

As she became more involved in clubhouse activities, Morgage felt her confidence grow and decided to go back to school. With the encouragement and help of Progress Place, she applied to George Brown College and completed a social service program.

With help from Progress Place, she then applied for and obtained a part-time job in her field. She decided to disclose her mental health issues to her employer and feels completely supported in her workplace. "Having a supportive work environment is really important," she told viewers.

With the encouragement of her worker at Progress Place, Morgage also applied to university and is now working towards her degree. She says Progress Place also helped her obtain supportive housing.

"Before, I could only see day to day. Now, I see a future ahead of me. Even in a pandemic, I'm so grateful to be working and going to school to fulfil my dreams... I felt like I had lost my voice, but the clubhouse helped me to find it again."

Maintaining Good Mental Health

Brown and the panelists all agreed that maintaining good mental health is as important as good physical health – and the ability to talk about mental illness is key to breaking down the stigma.

The one-hour webinar is available for viewing on the Progress Place YouTube channel.

Another virtual webinar is scheduled to take place in the fall. Stay tuned!

HOW YOU CAN HELP

Progress Place has been working hard to transition itself into a virtual entity and to make the necessary changes to ensure that crucial services are still accessible for people with severe and persistent mental illnesses when they need help the most.

But we can't do it alone. These adjustments require an immense amount of time, resources and money, and now, more than ever, Progress Place needs your support.

Please extend your kindness and support those who are most vulnerable in our community.

Visit progressplace.org to donate.

Progress Place staff can be reached by phone at 416.323.0223, Monday to Friday, 8:00 AM-5:00 PM, if you have any questions or need assistance.

Stay up to date with our latest COVID-19 changes by visiting progressplace.org/covid19 or by following us on social media:



PROGRESS PLACE

MENTAL WELLNESS

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