

Words of wisdom on Children's Mental Health

Written by Gayle Grass

For the RBC Children's Mental Health Project

I have a son who has a mental health disorder.

He has had this illness since he was 18 and is now 34. Throughout his early years and into high school, our son was a happy, loving child who excelled in academics and sports. Having competed in tennis most of his life, he was offered scholarships to several U.S. universities. Then he became ill and his dreams were shattered.

As a parent of a child with a mental health disorder, I have a unique perspective. In my quest to find help for my son, I explored several avenues – seeking advice from specialists, reading countless books on the topic and joining many mental health groups. But I soon realized that the primary obstacle for getting the proper care and services for my son was the stigma associated with mental health disorders. What could **I do** to change these attitudes? As a result of my experiences, I decided to write a children's book about children with mental health disorders. And so Iris the Dragon, a series of illustrated books, was created. My goal has been to use the Iris the Dragon Series to help parents and children understand that mental disorders do exist, they are often preventable, and that early education and recognition could make a huge difference. And, even more importantly, Iris the Dragon offers one thing we all need – **HOPE**.

*"I quickly purchased the book, and was brought immediately to tears, not because of the story, or the information provided, but because of the relief; for the first time having access to something concrete that would provide me a foundation to help my daughter, that provided me with **hope of a positive outcome**, and provided me with a relief that I was not the only one experiencing these difficulties, that others before me had experienced the same types of struggles, and that others were able to provide guidance, acceptance, and support." – Sarah Cannon*

As parents, we all share a common goal. Our stories are all the same. We love our children and only want to make them better. We are no different than a parent who has a child with cancer, diabetes, multiple sclerosis or cystic fibrosis. We are devastated when we hear the diagnosis and look toward the medical community for answers. We look for answers and understanding of the illness. We ask what resources there are in the community to support us. We look to the schools for programs and support.

We hope that our friends and family will be supportive. We hope that our child will recover. Hope is our strength, our defense, and our armor. We need resilient armor to do battle against the bitter reality that mental health disorders are not treated the same as other childhood illnesses, against the huge obstacle of social stigma perpetuated by an indifferent public, and against the pervasive lack of general knowledge about children's mental health disorders – which all delays the delivery of much needed, and often time-sensitive treatment – for an ailment that has the power to become a debilitating, lifelong condition!

Yet, our confidence is based on – **SUPPORT and EDUCATION**. Support, when it comes, is multifaceted – it may trickle in or flow. When it trickles, it can be given in an obligatory manner from "well intended" relatives, friends, or community and school members. When it flows, it is powerful and uplifting, and can be connected – especially when it comes in the form of

education – to RECOVERY. Education offers the gift of change. It changes community opinion and opens the door to rehabilitative programs. It changes and expands school curriculums to add lessons in social-emotional and mental health development. It even has the potential to change minds and opinions.

As an author on mental health issues, I have had the honour of being asked to speak to social workers, teachers, parents and children on the topic of mental health. Recently, Iris the Dragon was asked to serve as a member of the Open Minds Group which was formed by the Mental Health Commission of Canada as an anti-stigma initiative.

But as a parent and advocate, I know the need is great for an improved system that radiates medical support, community support, parental support and ultimately support and remediation for our children. We need to continue our fight to reduce the stigma and raise awareness. With HOPE, SUPPORT and EDUCATION, parents of children with mental health issues do have more options and opportunities to find help for their children and enable them to lead normal lives.