



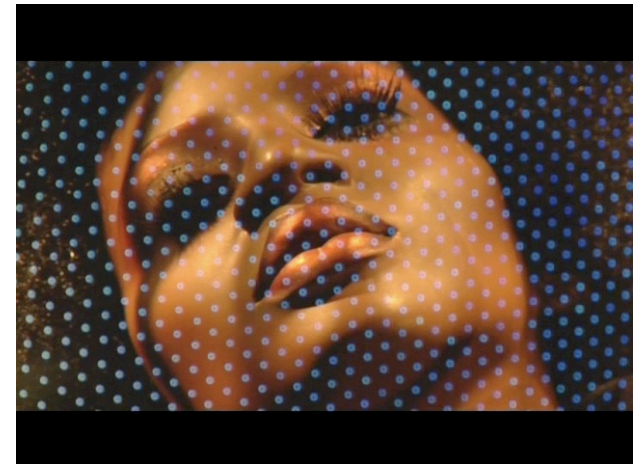
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schizophrenia peer support:
group/network

The Secret Handshake



THE SECRET HANDSHAKE:

THE FIRST PEER SUPPORT NETWORK MADE BY AND FOR PEOPLE WITH SCHIZOPHRENIA IN CANADA

Formed in 2004 in response to a void that exists in the after treatment of a patient following a schizophrenia diagnosis. *The Secret Handshake* is the first Peer Support Network in Canada created by people with schizophrenia for people with schizophrenia. Much like the model of peer support created by and for alcoholics in Alcoholics Anonymous.

The Secret Handshake recognizes that peers are well and uniquely equipped to counsel and support others coping with the illness. Members are like-minded and can mentor and share recovery techniques and resources. Most importantly, we build deep friendships based on mutual trust and respect, breaking the cycle of isolation, stigma and ostracism.

The diagnosis of any mental or physical illness requires treatment and support specific to that illness. This is why there is tremendous value in our Diagnostic Specific model.

The Secret Handshake was created to complement traditional mental health practice. While the right balance of medication for most is a necessary condition for a successful recovery, it is not sufficient on its own.

Once symptoms are under control, successful recovery must incorporate all areas of one's life including the emotional, psychological and social challenges of living with the reality of schizophrenia, both with regard to the symptoms and to the stigma that accompanies the diagnosis.

Many people coping with schizophrenia today do not have support and skills to reintegrate into the mainstream. They may not be aware of the services that are available to them. We help them navigate the system. They can be very isolated, even in a family setting. Members flourish when they meet regularly with people who are living with the schizophrenia experience.

Members have found this disease is manageable and they can live productive lives. Some have gone from being totally isolated for years to being highly functional.

This group has developed and is practicing a unique recovery model. Our simple, practical and effective approach to recovery includes Peer Support, Education/Research and Employment. The group also takes the weight off of families who have traditionally been taxed as the main caregivers.

We hope our recovery model will become standard practice across Canada.

"Just in the last month since I've joined the group, I've learned how to identify subtle patterns in my behavior that I am confident I can now work through."

"The group helped me navigate mental health resources I didn't even know existed."

"I never knew through the years of isolation that there were other people who were going through the same thing. I have hope now. I am getting my life back."

"I am working part time now and plan on becoming totally independent...My identity is not defined by a label in this group."

"My friends in the group helped me get back to school."

"Everyone understands what it's like. It's as if we all speak the same language; it's amazing really."

The Secret Handshake has broken new ground in the treatment of schizophrenia. It picks up where standard medical treatment leaves off and complements medical plans the patient already receives and, in so many cases, is unwilling to receive. Also, we have seen a marked decrease in the number of hospital admissions among members since initiating the group.

Much needed service is a much bandied phrase, but consider that 1 in 10 of those diagnosed with schizophrenia commit suicide. Peer Support thus becomes all the more urgent, and the care of members by other members has literally become a full time job.

We now have a clubhouse in Toronto's Kensington Market where members can find help anytime they need it — where one may call and speak with someone who has lived with schizophrenia and is recovering. Our members range from the Poet to PhD.

Because Schizophrenia Peer Support is not part of any existing mental health organization's mandate in Canada, we need your help.

Recent Articles about our group have appeared in the Toronto Star and Schizophrenia Digest. We are a recognized Charitable organization # 83747 5961 RR0001.

Images

A Beautiful Mind

Revolution #9

Donnie Darko

Autoplastic