



Central MA MIND Network

Music & Mental Health: Orchestrating Change in our Community

By: Kalea Barger

The UMass MIND had entered this past spring with hopes of hosting a live performance by the Me2/Orchestra for the Worcester community, the world's first orchestra for people with mental illness. These plans were abruptly canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

With great hopes for new forms of community outreach and involvement, the UMass MIND team adapted to new challenges resulting from the global pandemic. We were able to hold a webinar event on November 23rd, 2020, in place of the original plans for a live concert performance. This event was based on the newly released documentary *Orchestrating Change*. The documentary centers around the Me2/Orchestra, which works to promote dialogue about mental illness and dispel associated stereotypes and stigma. The orchestra provides a supportive environment for its members to do what they love: create music. Over the course of two years, the film follows several musicians' experiences living with mental illness and tells the inspiring story of the Me2/Orchestra and its members.

For this webinar event, we invited members of the orchestra, documentary producers, and local community leaders to discuss music and mental health.

Sandy Bartlett, a flutist with the orchestra expressed one of the biggest takeaways from this event. When asked what we can do as a society to aid in the understanding, discussion and treating of mental illness, Sandy responded "The first step is just to keep talking...The more that we are open about [mental illness] and the more that we talk about it is the best first step we could possibly do to make [understandings, discussions, and treatments] better for everyone."

Please [click here](#) to view a full highlight reel from this event.

Being A Voice In The Community: A Novel Approach To Outreach

By: Kareem Hamada

The UMass MIND Community Intervention Program (CIP), which was launched four years ago, has many branches of community outreach to increase public knowledge and awareness about mental illness. Utilizing various community venues and platforms, CIP conveys UMass MIND's cherished values of destigmatization, the importance of belonging, and advocating for individuals with serious mental illness. With substantial advancements made in improving resources in the Central Massachusetts area, UMass MIND hopes to widen its outreach efforts beyond our local community. Despite our program's significant progress, the stigma associated with mental illness remains pervasive both locally and nationally.



Unfortunately, mainstream media such as films, television series, talk shows, newspaper articles, and journalists frequently misrepresent mental illness and promote stigmatizing language in the general population, a consequence of sensationalism. Some examples include films such as: *Split*, *A Beautiful Mind*, *The Joker*, and television series like *13 Reasons Why*, so much so that words such as “psycho,” “psychotic,” “crazy,” “delusional,” “mad,” and “deranged,” have become part of our daily vocabulary. Yet, many do not understand the negative implications these words carry for individuals with lived experience. Such language contributes to further stigmatization of individuals with lived experience and, at times, may hinder their motivation to take part in treatment and recovery.

UMass MIND is utilizing a variety of platforms to address this stigma. This includes traditional platforms like newsletters, as well as new digital spaces like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and a blog on our website. These new platforms create interactive spaces where the community members can discuss issues surrounding the portrayal of mental illness in the mainstream media. By harnessing the interest generated in mental health by pop culture, UMass MIND’s blog can educate the public and reach a wider audience by connecting current events such as mainstream media, sharing public health implications, and fact-checking information. It is our hope that this will aid in reducing rampant sensationalism. Given our mission to stand inclusive of all individuals living with mental health challenges and their allies to facilitate their recovery, we are delighted to introduce our program’s new blogging initiative to become a more vocal advocate, especially in the increasingly popular digital space.



If you wish to share your own mental health experience, please call 508-856-MIND (6463) or email us at MIND@umassmed.edu. These stories will be shared publicly but can be anonymized.

Evan's Recovery: A Comeback Story

My recovery journey is extremely important to me because I would not be the person I am today without this journey. I had a very good childhood as far as I can remember, and I had a great relationship with my mom up until around 13 years old.

Around the age of 11, I became very withdrawn and depressed. It continued to worsen, leading up to my first hospitalization at the age of 15. By this time point I had begun to hear voices and see shadowy figures that seemed real to me but weren't there. I was diagnosed with depression with psychotic features.

My mental symptoms continued to progress. My hallucinations spread to the other senses and worsened. At the age of 16, I was diagnosed with early onset, treatment resistant schizophrenia. My life was very negatively impacted. All of my relationships were ruined, and my social and academic lives were crippled.

My everyday struggles were delusions, hallucinations of all five senses, and a very flat affect. I also developed akathisia about 4 years ago. Akathisia is when you cannot stop moving, and it developed from a medication. I had extremely disorganized thinking, and I lost advanced cognitive functioning.



Cognitive impairment makes it extremely difficult to complete books, memorize new things and follow directions without reminders. Paranoia made me unwilling to form connections with healthcare providers and family. I refused to eat anything that I didn't cook myself, and I refused medications. On multiple occasions my parents and I were told that the doctors didn't know how to help me.

My strengths are that I am personable and charismatic; I have a good sense of humor and a huge heart; I also love to learn; and I can easily identify triggers before they happen. My biggest weakness is that sometimes my emotions can get the best of me in the moment. My most helpful psychiatrist did a good job at trying different medication combinations until he found one that helped me the most. I always spoke on what I heard and believed, and my doctor never judged me for it. I also had a few peer mentors who made me realize that other people go through similar journeys and can still be successful.



For about a year after I realized I had an illness, I thought of myself as crazy because of all the stigma around schizophrenia. It took a lot of research, education, and reassurance for me to realize that I am no different than anyone else other than my illness. Currently, I work as a peer mentor and run a weekly mental health support group. This work is extremely fulfilling to me because I have an opportunity to help people in need and make a difference. I am enrolled in college with psychology as my major. My biggest advice to everyone would be to do whatever it takes to accept, love yourself, and always work towards accomplishing your goals.

The Central Massachusetts MIND Network aims to create a community space to build knowledge, develop skills, and share resources regarding psychosis, schizophrenia and severe mental illness. Please share with us your novel ideas, useful resources, upcoming events, research updates and inspiring stories. You may reach us by phone at 508-856-MIND (6463) or by e-mail at mind@umassmed.edu. To learn more about us, [click here](#). Follow us on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), and [Twitter](#).

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