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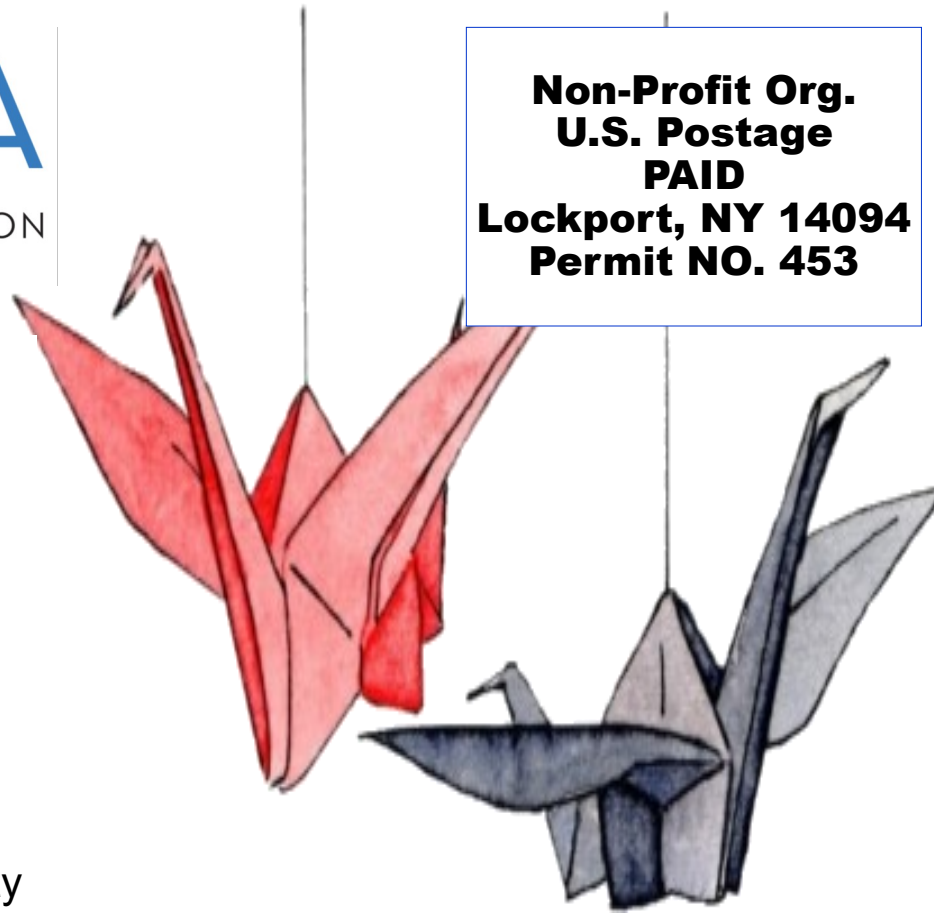


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The Mission of The Mental Health Association in Niagara County, Inc. is to promote mental wellness by sponsoring and implementing advocacy, education and community service programs.

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Summer Edition: May 2020

The Voice

A letter from a community member

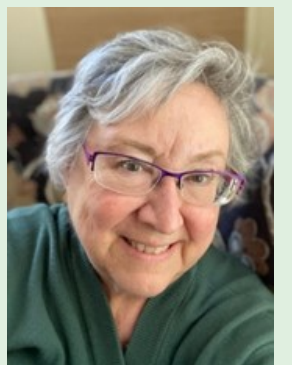
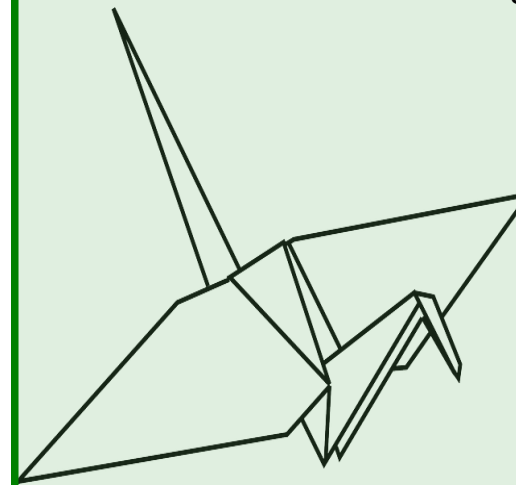


Many of you may recognize my face, or possibly my voice. I spend my time at the front desk several days each week, and also host our television show *The Many Faces of Mental Health*. It's my pleasure to reach out to you through "The Voice" and share some of my thoughts about life during this pandemic.

We've all had disappointments and frustrations over the past two months, but we've also learned new skills. I can participate in a Zoom meeting now! Events have been postponed or cancelled and we have become shut-ins, whether we are introverts or extroverts. Here in the office we have all had to adjust and redefine our goals and aspirations.

When you open this newsletter you will find a small gift that was to be part of our celebration of May as Mental Health Awareness Month. The gift was intended to help focus our thoughts on wellness and remind us that recovery is possible. Our TV show was going to include connections to support mental health, ways to cope with a diagnosis, and highlights of events that were scheduled in all of our programs that would enhance our strengths and support our happiness. We were also planning an Art Show that would highlight a gifted young artist. None of that is going away, it will just happen at a later date — the new normal includes the phrase "to be announced" — a later date, a later time, when circumstances allow!

That being said, continue focusing on the things that help you stay well – take a walk, chat with a friend, have a conversation at a safe distance with a neighbor. Even books and movies are a welcome distraction, and did you know you can borrow items from the library online? Please know that the staff of the Mental Health Association is still here for you. You can call the MHA HELP Line at 716-433-5432 or email us through our website. If you become overwhelmed and need crisis support you can text "MHA" to 741741 or call Niagara County Crisis Services at 716-285-3515. Remember you are not alone, because we are all in this together!



Jackie Kenney
Program Assistant

Mental Health Awareness Month 2020

Happy Mental Health Awareness Month! We are excited to celebrate this month with all of you, even if that is by virtual or alternative means.

While the last couple months has been a challenge for everyone, May is a great time to reflect on how mental health affects you, what can be done to improve your experience with mental health, and how we can continue an open, honest, and hopeful conversation with everyone in Niagara County. It is through conversation that we heal with one another and create hope for tomorrow.

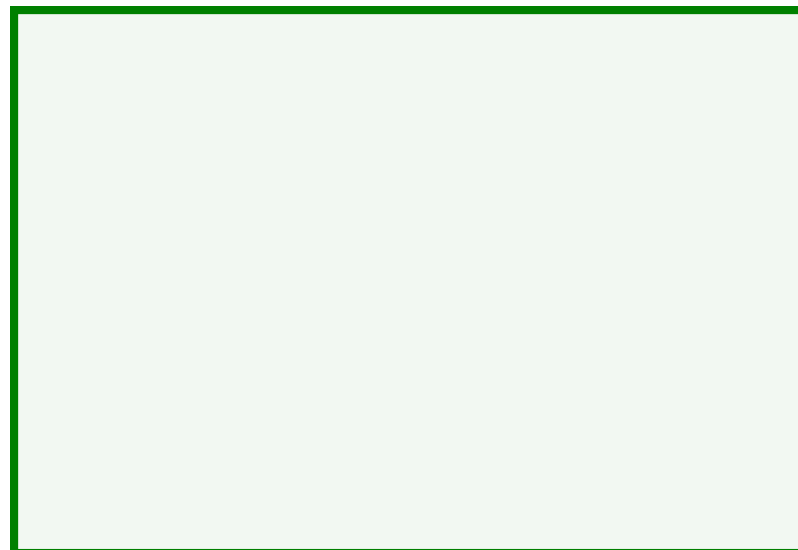
The MHA team is here to support you in spreading hope and healing throughout the community. That is why we have made origami cranes just for you.

These cranes are a Japanese symbol of hope and healing! Please accept the crane below as a favor from us to you. Keep this crane of hope and health or pass it to someone who needs it more than you.

If you would like more cranes to pass on the hope and healing, please contact the MHA at (716)433-3780. We have a supply on hand that can be delivered or picked up. Please note that there is a limited supply.

Sending hope, healing, and good health,

~The MHA team



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Coordinator
Compeer Niagara
Coordinator
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A Peers Perspective Mara Scive, Certified Peer Specialist

A peer is someone who has lived experience and wants to share those experiences. Being a peer has been one of the most rewarding journeys of my life! As a peer, my job is to support others through their recovery and use my own experience as a guide. While everyone has faced different battles, there are still ways to connect and relate by having open, honest, and unashamed conversations.

When I first began seeking treatment for my mental illness, I was able to speak with a peer specialist and I knew from that moment that I wanted to be a peer. Eight years later, I was able to make that dream a reality! Living with a mental illness has been difficult, but becoming a peer is something positive that has come from my journey and helped to support my mental wellness. The opportunity to become a peer brought my own recovery full circle and I am grateful that the MHA has been able to facilitate this opportunity.

Being able to connect with others who are struggling is what I love most about being a peer. There is so much stigma that surrounds the discussion relating to mental health and being able to speak up and break that stigma is important. Any opportunity to talk openly about mental health and illness helps to show that it's okay to not be okay. In fact, it is completely normal. A peer understands firsthand how difficult that is and offers a safe place without stigma to speak about what challenges and barriers they are facing.

Mental illness is not something to be ashamed of. A diagnosis does not define you. A diagnosis might be part of you or your story, but how you learn to live with and manage your diagnosis/illness shows strength and resilience. Being a peer allows me to connect with my community at a deeper level, fight stigma, and provide a much-needed safe space for those that feel marginalized. Expectedly, through this journey as a peer I have had the opportunity to meet some of the strongest people I know.

IMPORTANT ANNOUNCEMENT

We are currently updating our service directory HELP BOOK. If you work for an organization, agency, or offer any kind of supportive community services and want your information included, contact Danielle Conlan at (716)433-3780 or email dconlan@mhanc.com

Peer Services Information

If you are interested in learning more about peer services, please call Director, Crystal Hites at (716)433-3780 or call the Hope House at (716)433-1086

Embracing The Future

Crystal Hites Peer Activities Director, Certified Peer Specialist

“You can clutch the past so tightly to your chest that it leaves your arms too full to embrace the present.” - Jan Glidewell

May being Mental Health Awareness Month, I thought I'd bring up the idea of not being able to fully enjoy the present because we are stuck longing for the past, or trauma from the past. *And we may not even be aware we're doing it!*

A simple sign that we're stuck in the past is being unhappy with the present, even when the present has many things to enjoy. You may be missing work-life prior to COVID-19, so you disregard the joy of sleeping in longer, writing with a purring cat on your lap, or being able to do a YouTube yoga session on your lunch break. You may be missing an ex so much that you don't find fulfilling ways to use your new free time, or start a healing journey that will make your next relationship healthier. You may be so caught up on those who have hurt you that you miss out on healthy relationships that could be yours with just one phone call.

If your present seems empty, see if your past is too full.

We all have lost a lot to COVID-19. Let's not deny that. Most of us miss the pre-COVID-19 world dearly, and are hung up on losing. But let's not grieve so much that we cannot see the joys we do have and embrace a beautiful future together.

This month, my personal focus as a mental health peer and person is letting go of old hurts, and looking at unconscious thought patterns that have dominated my past life- and overcoming those with consciously chosen positive affirmations. For so long, I was unaware of these thoughts, but Mental Health Awareness month is the perfect time to become aware of what's hampering my life. Looking at unconscious drives certainly is awareness in a true May Mental Health Awareness sense! However, I actually kick-started this in April and it has already made a huge difference in my ability to enjoy what is in front of me without the old hang-ups of fear, fear, fear.

Letting go of the past is hard, sometimes painful. But you're not alone in it. I'm here, under the same stars as you, working at it as you are, growing along with you.



We're always accepting generous donations through cash, check or online at www.mhanc.com

MEANING OF THE ORIGAMI CRANE

The Japanese word, "origami" is a combination of two words in Japanese: "ori" which means "to fold" and "kami" which means "paper". It is believed that Japanese origami began in the 6th century and because of the high costs of paper, origami was only used for religious ceremonial purposes.



ILLUSTRATION COURTESY OF DAVID NAMISATO, ©2011

In Japan, the crane is a mystical creature and is believed to live for a thousand years. As a result, in the Japanese, Chinese and Korean culture, the crane represents good fortune and longevity. The Japanese refer to the crane as the "bird of happiness". The wings of the crane were believed to carry souls up to paradise. Mothers who pray for the protection of the crane's wings for their children will recite the prayer:

*"O flock of heavenly cranes
cover my child with your wings."*

Traditionally, it was believed that if one folded 1000 origami cranes, one's wish would come true. It has also become a symbol of hope and healing during challenging times. As a result, it has become popular to fold 1000 cranes (in Japanese, called "senbazuru"). The cranes are strung together on strings – usually 25 strings of 40 cranes each – and given as gifts.

A famous story about senbazuru is that of Sadako Sasaki (see "*Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes*" by Eleanor Coerr [1977]). Sadako was a little girl who was exposed to radiation as an infant when the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. Although she survived the bomb, she was diagnosed with leukemia by the age of 12. She decided to fold 1000 cranes, hoping that her wish to live would come true. Unfortunately, she only was able to fold 644 cranes before she passed away. Her classmates then continued to fold cranes in her honour and she was buried with a wreath of 1000 cranes to honour her dream. There is now a statue of Sadako in Hiroshima Peace Park – a little girl standing with her hand outstretched, holding a paper crane. Every year, thousands of wreaths of senbazuru are draped over her statue.

Source: Japanese Canadian Cultural Center, https://www.jccc.on.ca/origami-cranes/pdf/meaning_of_the_origami_crane.pdf

Compeer Niagara: “The Togetherness Tree”

Tara Porter, Compeer Niagara Director

This school year, I piloted a new service model for Kids Compeer Niagara, a program of the MHANC. My goal was to bring youth mentors and youth mentees together. With the generous and amazing support of the Lockport City School District our program has been a success!

It's been tough not seeing the kids at program since NYS PAUSE, but we've been staying in touch the best we can. I want the community to know they have wonderful youths! The leadership, talent, and desire to improve and contribute to our community are just a few awesome attributes of the youths in this program and what they have to offer.

I'm excited to reveal an artist's representation of Compeer Niagara. He knows that Compeer Niagara is all about bringing people together and enjoying time with one another so he translated it onto the canvas!

Our artist is Max F., one of our Compeer Niagara mentors that is incredibly gifted! Max is currently a 15 year old Sophomore at Lockport High School. I am grateful to have Max not only as a Compeer Niagara mentor, but as an artist in my community.

The Mental Health Association in Niagara County will be hosting an art show/open house once it is safe to gather again. The show will feature work by Max. I hope everyone takes the opportunity to see this exceptional piece in person along with other awesome works of art.

Please stay tuned for details. Until then, everyone stay healthy and keep in touch.



“The Togetherness Tree” By Max F.

**Interested in
volunteering with
Compeer Niagara?**

**Call now at
(716)433-3780 / visit
www.mhanc.com**

Life Story

Colleen McCormick, Niagara County Community Member

My name is Colleen and I've been involved with the Mental Health Association in Niagara County for 30 years and am excited to be sharing my story with you in this edition of The Voice. This is the story of my struggle with mental illness and how I live in recovery! My story starts with denial about mental illness and resistance to being involved in treatment plans. But this story has not ended, and today I live my wellness plans.

I believe that I always had mental health issues. At a young age I started self-medicating. By 18, I was fully self-medicating and experienced one of my first major life events—I got pregnant and gave birth to my daughter, Stacy. I struggled to take care of myself and my daughter until I was 23 when I realized that I needed help. I started treatment services, but was in denial about my illness. I was scared of the responsibility that came with getting healthy and being a parent! These feelings combined with a lot of negative self-talk made it difficult to get through treatment, tend to my responsibilities, and achieve my goals. As a result of the circumstances, my child was put into foster care.

During this period in my life, I struggled to find and maintain a job. Whenever I found a job, I was always nervous to start working because I had also started beauty school. Fortunately, I managed to finish school, but was limited to working part-time due to mental health challenges. Still I struggled. On top of trying to work, attend treatment, and change my life-style, I was also visiting my daughter three times a week and taking parenting classes.

It continued to be a challenge to maintain my motivation and regulate my sleep schedule. In fact, I did not sleep very much. This contributed to the instability in my life and the increasing stress I was experiencing. I continued with my treatment services through the years, but was only going through the motions. I did receive some positive benefits, but did not really achieve wellness and recovery...yet. Being a better parent for Stacy is what kept me motivated! It took time, hard work, and patience, but treatment and parenting classes helped me to get Stacy back. Still, I had to work for my health and happiness.

At 39, I met a very dear friend who I am still close with today! After developing a friendship, my

friend reached out and wanted to support me in getting healthy. I believe that this friendship and social support is what set me on the path I am on today! My friend made me feel understood and helped me to be active in my own recovery. We learned about mental illness and treatments together.

It was through our research that I began to advocate for myself and became involved with North Tonawanda Life Center (Recovery Plus). Through Life Center, I started getting more appropriate medications and treatment that fit my unique needs. I changed my diet, stopped going to bars, started maintaining friendships, developed healthy hobbies, and got grounded in my own life.

I started doing better. I was getting healthier. I was participating in treatment and working out a routine that would meet all my needs. But things took a turn in 2011 when my daughter Stacy passed away. That was difficult and put a strain on my mental, physical, and spiritual health. In 2016 I went through a major medication change that got the best of me. As a result, I relapsed and was in the hospital again. It felt like a step back, but I wasn't going to let it hold me down.

It took time but I persevered. I worked hard and got back to a healthy place! While I continue to miss Stacy, I see her live on through my beautiful grandson. Through all these challenges a hard lesson was learned—recovery is not linear. It is a life journey filled with ups and downs. I won't always be riding the high so I must stay committed to learning how to ride the lows.

Today, I continue to be in recovery! I have made some changes to my routines and continued some old practices. Along with a combination of medication, therapy, social support, exercise, and faith I believe that I can stay grounded and stable. I have learned so much about physical and mental health on my journey. It has not been easy getting here, but it has been worth it! In fact, this has been in the making for years.

I believe that recovery is possible for anyone. I hope that when you finish reading this you feel inspired to keep pressing forward because you CAN live your BEST life! Remember, recovery is full of ups and downs, but how we handle the journey is what counts!