PEER SUPPORT with Jason Balgopal

Introduction

- Jason Balgopal & Peer Support
  - Lawyer for over 25 years who has dealt with depression
  - Been part of the Scarborough HSJCC for many years
  - Ask questions when you have them.
  - Brief discussion of the statistics of mental health issues
  - Explain his own story
  - Discussion of peer support
  - Explanation of the genesis of the Peer Support meetings
  - Review of how the Peer Support meetings work
  - Explanation of how to start a Peer Support network

POLL QUESTIONS

- QUESTION # 1: Are you affected by a mental health issue? (Y/N)
  (or someone you know)

- QUESTION #2: What is the primary concern? (Choose one)
  (Depression / Anxiety / PTSD / OCD / Schizophrenia / ADHD / ASD / Other)

- QUESTION #3: How much does this mental health issue affect daily life?
  (0-10: 0=None, 10=Severely)

- QUESTION #4: How much do you know about peer support?
  (0-10: 0=None, 10=A lot!)

Statistics of Mental Health

- 1 in 5 people in Canada will experience a problem with their mental health this year.[1]
- The stigma attached to mental health problems presents a serious barrier to treatment and support.[1]
- Each year just over 15% of Canadians visit a doctor for their mental health problem, and over a 5-year period, just over 1/3 receive treatment.[2]
- 20% of all sick leaves in Canada are related to mental health.[3]

- [1] Government of Canada (2006), The human face of mental health and mental illness in Canada. Ottawa, ON: Minister of Public Works and Government Services.
- [2] Martens, P., Fransoo, R. McKeen, N., et al (2004). Patterns of regional mental illness disorder diagnoses and service use in Manitoba: a population-based study. Winnipeg, MB: Manitoba Centre for Health Policy, p. 28.
- [3] Statistics Canada. (2003). Canadian Community Health Survey: Mental Health and Well-being.

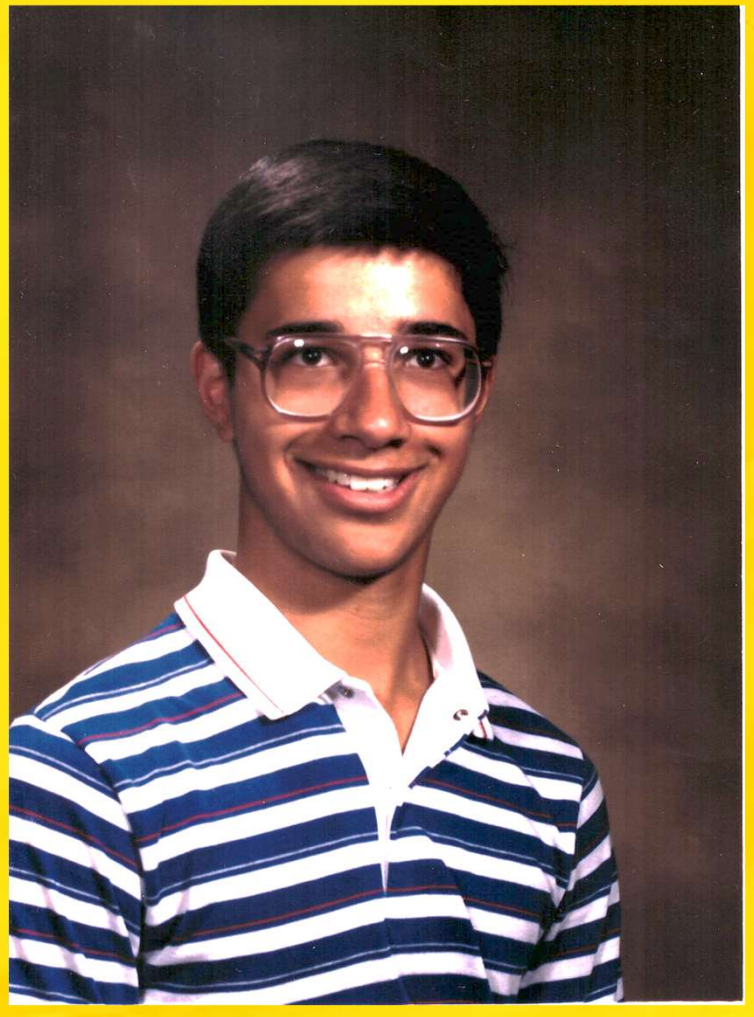
Jason’s story

- Fun loving and happy child.
- Perfectionist tendencies.
- Undiagnosed as on the autism spectrum.

Jason's story

- Awkward teenage years.

- Not understanding the subtle cues in life and how others seemed to know just what to do and say.



Jason’s story

- By the end of law school, my self-esteem had entered a downward trajectory.

- Depression and anxiety started.

Jason's story

- As my professional life started, so, too, did the depths of my depression and anxiety.

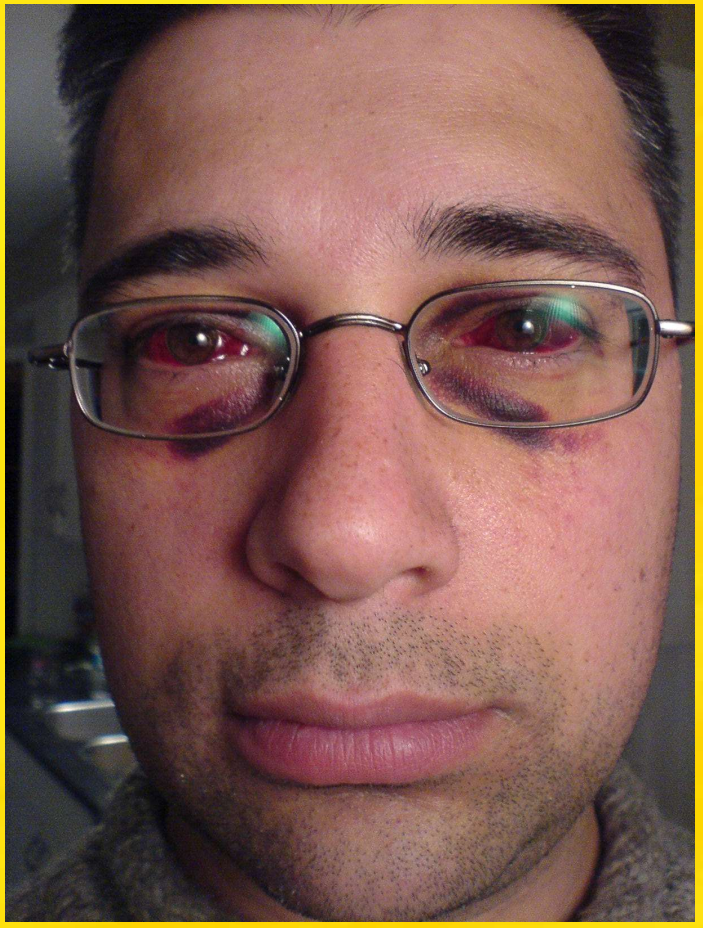
- Was work the cause of this, or just a coincidence?

Jason's story

- In criminal justice, the process is structured in favour of the defendant (as it should be).
- That meant, however, that I was not as "successful" as I wanted.
- And the perfectionist in me found it difficult to make mistakes, or be called out by the judge.
- By 2007, I had seen a psychiatrist, but we did not "connect".

Jason's story

- Later that year, sadly, I made an attempt.
- That negatively affected my career, in addition to my self-esteem.
- It did, however, put me in contact with a different psychiatrist, who was great!



Jason's story

- I took medication, talk therapy, read a lot of books on the topic…
- Eventually I got into a better "head space"…no longer needed the medication, and eventually my psychiatrist advised that I no longer needed her weekly support.
- I wasn't "cured"…but I was better.
- Yet, what I felt I was lacking was the support of "peers"…people who had "walked a mile in my shoes".

Jason's story

- For me, I compare the support I needed to a web…a web of support.
- Sometimes, it's just one thread that is needed…sometimes many
- For some people, only a few threads of support are needed…for others, many.

- Peer support was just one additional thread of support in this web.

Why Peer Support?

- I saw a clip from the show “The West Wing”, and it made a great impression on me.

- Josh (who jokes about being afraid of rectangles) has experienced a traumatic situation, and has been affected (and it’s showing at work).

- Leo, his boss, tells a story which encapsulates the ethos of peer support.

Why Peer Support?

Why Peer Support?

Studies have shown that peer support has been able to provide:

> "a reduction in hospitalization, enhanced personal growth, which included "increased confidence in their own capabilities, ability to cope with the illness, self-esteem, and sense of empowerment and hope". Further, being a peer employee [facilitator] helps to challenge self-stigma, to engage in one's own recovery and self-discovery, to enhance their social support network, find positive means to spend their time, and gainful employment therefore, achieving a better quality of life." [4]

[4] Fortuna KL, Solomon P, Rivera J. An Update of Peer Support/Peer Provided Services Underlying Processes, Benefits, and Critical Ingredients. Psychiatr Q. 2022 Jun;93(2):571-586. doi: 10.1007/s11126-022-09971-w. Epub 2022 Feb 18. PMID: 35179660; PMCID: PMC8855026.

How these groups started

Mental health support group launches

By Jon Muldoon

AN UPPER Beach resident is starting up a mental health support group after living for years wishing there were something like it available in the Beach or East End.

Jason Balgopal struggled with depression for years, and always wished there were some sort of similar groups available for people to share stories and offer mutual support.

"For a number of years it was a great struggle for me to just get up and do what everyone else does in life," he said.

"[This group is] an outgrowth of what I would have wanted when I was really suffering from depression."

Talking with others is a great benefit to those suffering with mental health issues, but it's often quite difficult to find a safe forum to do so, he said.

"I find when I talk to other people who are similarly situated, it really makes me feel not alone. You kind of derive a bit of strength from that," said Balgopal.

"People feel more comfortable that there are other people like them out in the community, and in hearing those stories they will hopefully find commonalities and get support from that."

The group, modelled loosely after Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, is open to anyone suffering from mental health issues or their family members. Meetings will follow the AA format, with a guest speaker and an opportunity for sharing personal stories with the group.

The speaker for the inaugural meeting will be Andjelka Palikucin-Reljin, a certified clinical psychologist. A speaker for the second meeting, at the end of February, will discuss accessing services.

Balgopal said he was inspired to start the group after the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health posted a series of videos on YouTube of past clients, including him. He said the reaction from friends and acquaintances showed him there was a need for more support in the community.

"If just telling my story could help people look for help themselves, then that's really powerful," he said.

The group is set to launch the day after the Bell Canada Let's Talk event, which promotes open discussion about mental health issues. Balgopal is unsure how many people will come out for the local group, but believes there is definitely a need in the community. The first meeting will take place from 7 to 8 p.m. on Thursday, Jan. 29, at Community Centre 55.

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How these peer support groups work

Either in-person or on-line:

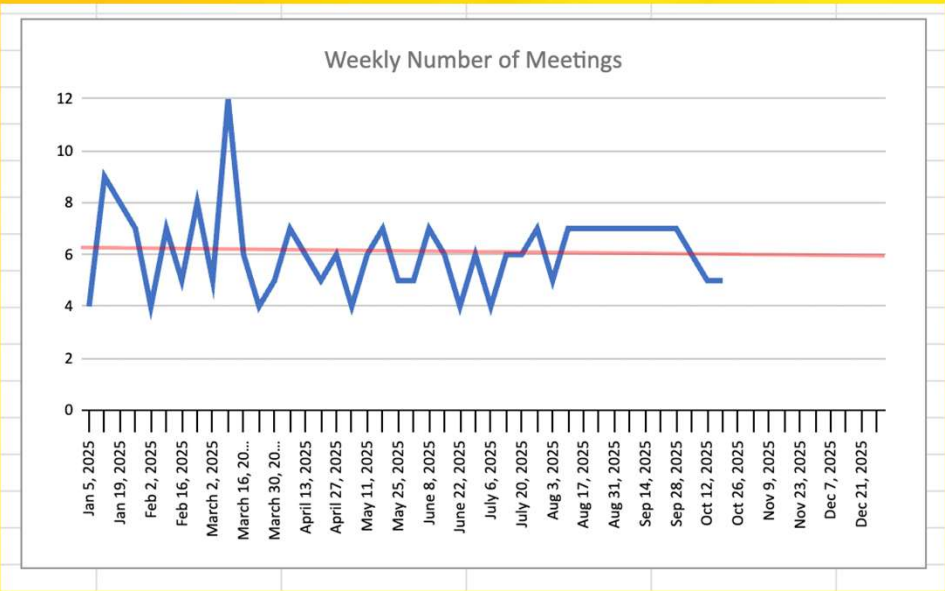
1. Everyone can share, but there is no pressure to do so: Simply being there is enough.
   - People who WANT to listen (not burning out spouse, family, friends)
   - Get off their chest what is bothering them…and only what they want to share – no one asks questions.
   - Learn they are not alone

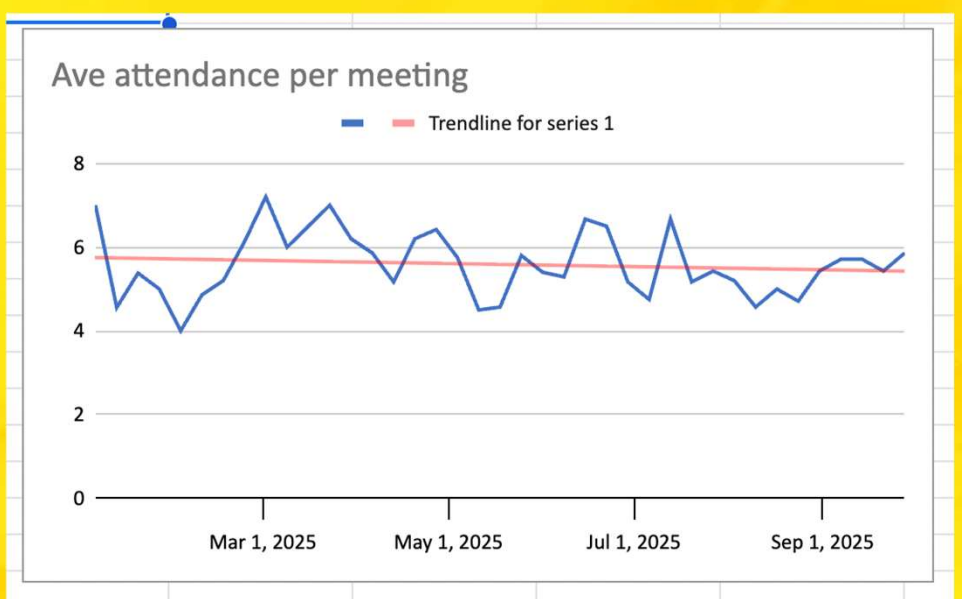
2. The person who shared, can then get “Feedback”…which is either empathy, or something that worked for another person
   - We never tell someone what they “should” do, as we are not doctors and do not know.
   - Real-world techniques – increases confidence, no “white lab coat”

3. Free professional therapy

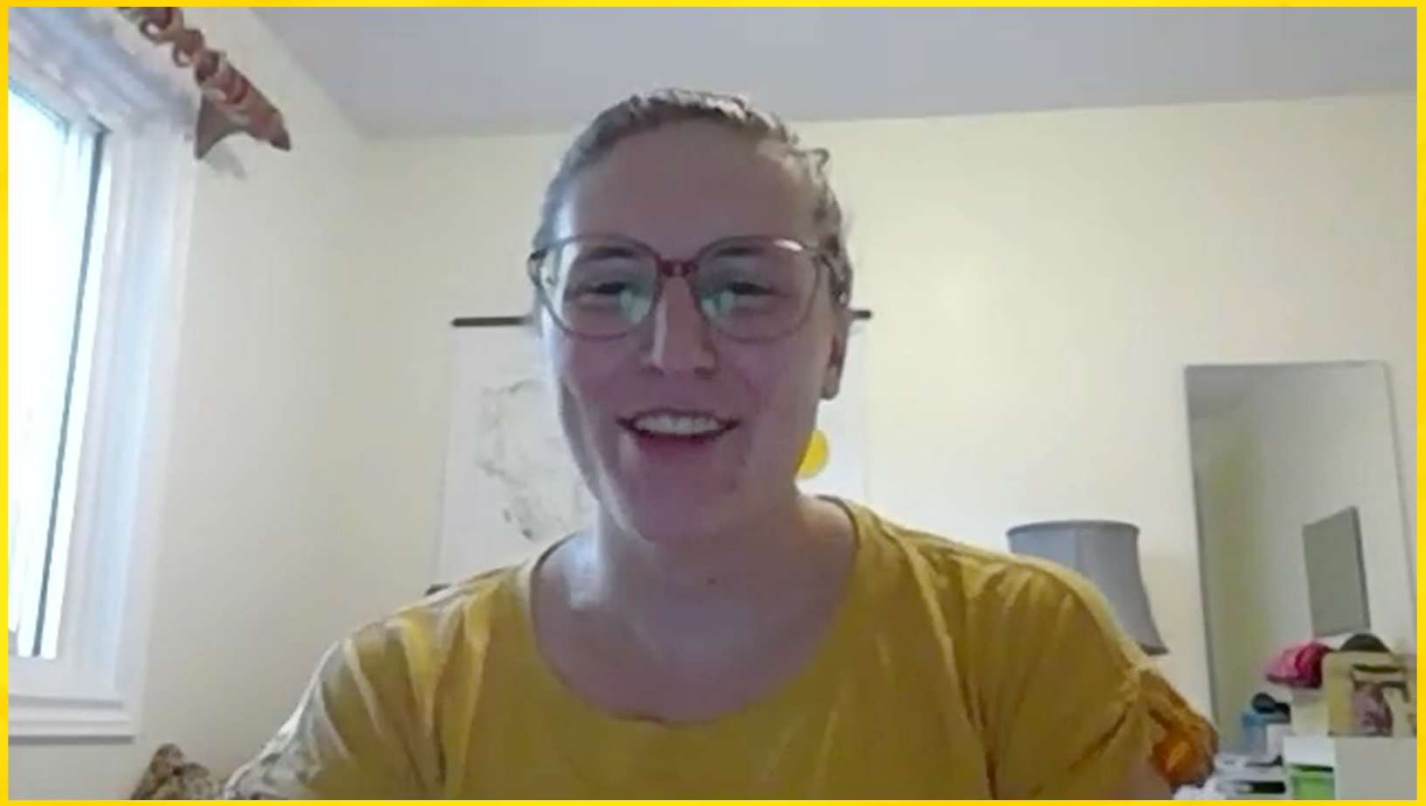
How these peer support groups work

How many people are helped?





How successful and helpful are they?



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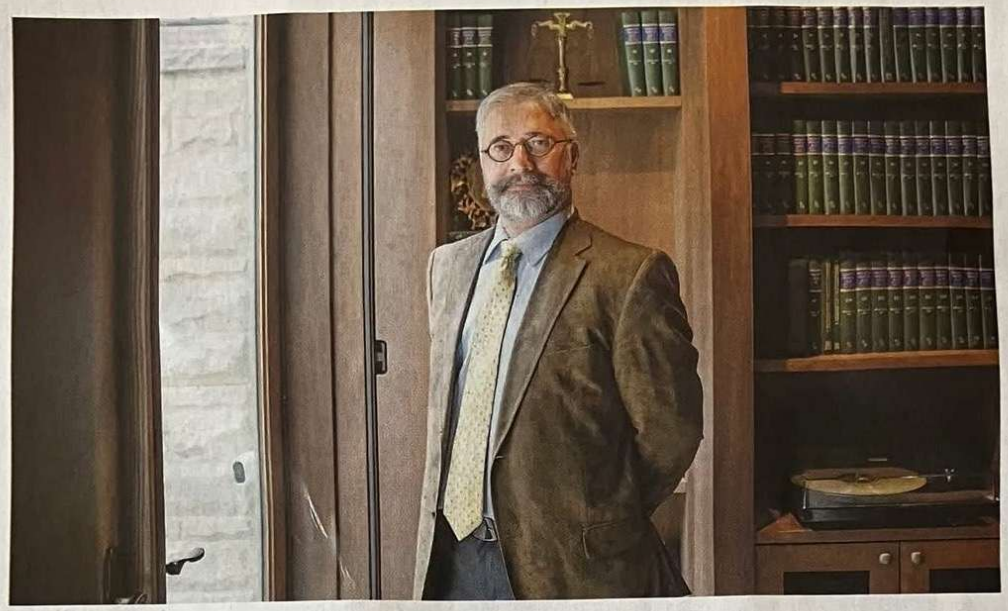

Jason Balgopal is pictured at his home in Toronto earlier in June. He and his wife, Leigh Balgopal, started a community mental-health program, Beaches Mental Wellness, in 2015 after he experienced depression and attempted suicide. LAURA PROCTOR/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Mental Wellness support group hopes to build empathy and foster connection

PAUL WALDIE

PITCHING IN

The organizers: Jason and Leigh Balgopal

The cause: Launching Mental Wellness Peer Support Groups

Toronto lawyer Jason Balgopal spent a decade suffering from depression that was so severe he attempted suicide.

Mr. Balgopal considers himself fortunate because he was able to receive treatment and a lot of support. "I got help from a psychiatrist and a therapist and medication and read lots of books," he said from his home in Toronto.

But he'd been leaning heavily on his family and he didn't have contact with people who faced similar experiences. So in 2015, he started gathering like-minded people together.

He called it the Mental Wellness Peer Support Group and organized monthly meetings in a local community centre. The idea proved so popular that groups quickly formed across the city and there are now dozens of meetings a month.

Each session is one-hour long and led by members who have received mental-health training. "Everybody has an opportunity to get off their chest what's bothering them, but there's no obligation to speak. Simply being there is enough," he said.

Members also offer each other feedback, but not by telling others what to do. "Our feedback is just empathy, or a technique that worked for us personally when I was in your shoes," he said.

The meetings, which are free and typically involve around seven people, moved online at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, which vastly expanded availability of the service. "Now, we offer support to people anywhere in the world, anywhere in Canada, almost every night of the week," said Mr. Balgopal.

In 2023, Mr. Balgopal and his wife, Leigh, incorporated the organization as a non-profit and they rely almost entirely on donations. The money raised helps the group offer members five free professional therapy sessions, and a discount on future sessions.

Mental Wellness is now helping around 2,500 people and the couple hope to expand it to reach more young people.

Mr. Balgopal, 54, hasn't seen his psychiatrist in years. But he knows that depression never completely goes away. "It's something that you've got to manage, and it's something that the groups, for me, actually help out quite a lot."

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How to start a peer support group

- Safe & Secure location – in-person, or on-line
  - Everyone seeing and hearing everyone else promotes feelings of safety and inclusion (imagine sitting in a circle in the basement of a local community centre)
- Ease of access
  - Same physical location
  - “Static Zoom link” or Teams or other platform
- Confidentiality – what happens in the group, stays in the group
- Regularity – humans are creatures of habit.

How to start a peer support group

- Facilitator
  - We give them Mental Health First Aid training
  - Someone who leads the meeting
    - Ensuring that the physical space is available, or the Zoom room is open
    - Ensuring that the structure and rules are followed (not asking questions, not giving “advice” (only empathy or best-practice), etc…)
    - Ensures that everyone has time to speak
    - Ensures that the meeting starts and ends on time (important…1 hour is good…2 hours is too long)
  - Backup facilitators
    - Vicarious trauma
    - Everyone needs a break or vacation

How to start a peer support group

- Advertising – if people don't know about this…they won't attend
- Make it personal

How to start a peer support group

- Offer a “Bonus”: Our groups take money from donations (we are a nationally registered not-for-profit), and we offer FREE therapy with a licenced therapist.
- Partnering with other health care professionals can help!

How to start a peer support group

- Start locally, then grow
  - I started at my local community centre
  - Now, offer groups throughout Canada, and around the world
  - Goal is to offer groups 24/7 – in multiple languages
- Start with your organization
  - I am part of the “VOICES for Mental Health” – a grassroots organization which provides education and awareness about mental health issues in the Ministry of the Attorney General.
  - Offer peer support every Thursday at 1:00pm to anyone in the Ontario Public Service

Wrap-up

- Question #5: Now, how much do you know about peer support?

(0-10: 0=None, 10=A lot!)

Thank you!

- Thank you for listening
- If you wish more information, please contact me directly at:

Jason@MentalWellness.help