

## Story Title: The Power of Compassion to Treat Depression

Date Submitted: May 16, 2020

### Story Summary

Who: J, father of a son receiving psychiatric services

What: Psychiatric services

When: 2016 - 2017

Where: BC Children's Hospital

Why: J's son was going through a time of deep depression and social anxiety, including acts of self-harm

### Tags

#anxiety #depression #teenager #psychiatry #youth #bcchildrens #compassion

### Background Information

Age: teenager

Language(s) Spoken at Home: English

Gender: male

This story was written by a:

- Patient
- Family Member/Caregiver
- VCH Staff (with permission from patient/caregiver)
- Other

This story is about a:  Patient  Family Member/Caregiver  Other

### Story

It seemed like a lifetime ago, but it was only four years ago when my teenage son was going through the toughest time in his young life. He could not grasp why he couldn't go to school and why he struggled to connect with others. All he knew was how heavy the pain felt to even think about putting himself through another day. He felt numb, empty, hollow, meaningless, alone. He no longer cared what happened next. He just wanted to stop feeling this pain. Nothing anyone could say, nor do could change his thoughts about not wanting to live. There was no point. Nothing meant anything to him anymore.

The staff at BC Children's psychiatric ward were nothing short of amazing. From the very first call and email from their administration, I immediately felt a sense of hope. They were compassionate, informative and did their best to accommodate seeing my son in a timely fashion. When we arrived at the ward, we were given clear instructions on where to go and who we were going to see. The waiting room was clean and pleasant, giving everyone lots of space and natural lighting to feel more relaxed. This was especially important for a patients dealing with mental health struggles. This little detail made it feel less like we were in a hospital. The bubble hockey table gave us some added entertainment as well while we waited. Dr L. saw my son and he was incredibly friendly, talking to my son like a mentor

and peer. He was compassionate, understanding and patient, and never once made us feel rushed or like an inconvenience. He assessed my son also for schizophrenia and autism because it runs in my family history. He was thorough in explaining his diagnosis, providing my son with immediate solutions, including a prescription for Cipralex. He listened and never once judged or dismissed my son's perspective.

## Best and Worst Aspects of the Experience

The best aspect was getting hope from the Doctor. He was compassionate with his approach and provided multiple options that provided immediate relief. I remember leaving the hospital with my son, and the two of us felt happier (like we got a shot of dopamine) and wanted to celebrate by going out for ramen right away.

I think there's an opportunity for a closer follow up appointment. Understandably, resources are limited, but it would have been even more helpful for my son if he had a chance to see Dr L. again, much sooner. He had a follow up, I believe in about 3-4 months' time, but when it comes to mental health, I feel an earlier follow up would be beneficial, especially after prescribing a new medication for him. Plus clearly, he's such an amazing doctor that my son would have welcomed the chance to speak with him again fairly soon.

In addition, I didn't really know who to reach in the first place regarding my son's depression. I decided to see our family doctor first who referred us to BC Children's. Understandably, there's filters that are needed, but the extra step of getting a referral can be time consuming, especially when dealing with mental health issues that are dire. Thankfully, they called us quite quickly, but the waiting (and indefinite time frame) was quite nerve wracking.

## Experience after Receiving Care

Thanks to the support from Dr. L., along with follow up appointments and counselling, my son is doing much better now. The experience also provided me with encouragement to continue to be compassionate to my son's pain. As a single dad who's struggled with depression as well and struggled with anger, I learned the power of compassion can transform low feelings of oneself, into a more manageable state. Compassion from myself and from BC Children's validated my son's feelings of depression. These are real feelings that we cannot touch and see which makes it more difficult to comprehend. But as a parent, trusting my son and validating his thoughts helped him overcome much of his struggles. It wasn't overnight, but when we went through the process with BC Children's, we felt confident that we were on the right track to recovery. Today, mental health is something my son and I talk about openly. It's a language we both share in common. If we feel depressed, we openly talk it with one and other, without stigma. We've normalized the topic of mental health in our family.

## Take Home Message(s)

Many people don't know what to do when it comes to depression. I have friends call me to ask what they should do about their kids with depression, knowing that I experienced it firsthand with my son. I always direct them to their family doctor first, who can help them get assessed by a psychiatrist. I feel it was important for the diagnosis from BC Children's. They give so much energy and positive feelings to

give families hope. I think a diagnosis and prescription from a GP would not have been as compassionate (not from our GP anyway). The importance of acknowledging someone with depression through the use of genuine compassion can bring much needed hope for anyone going through it. Sometimes a very empowering solution is achieved simply by validating someone's feelings of depression.