

# ARTS & LIFE

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Doggin' it at the office / D5



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## Out of the DARKNESS

Once-suicidal Winnipeg businessman working to 'smash the stigma' surrounding mental-health issues

**H**OW are you? That question has become such a cliché, that often the person asking will walk away before the receiver has a chance to respond.

We ask it of each other out of rote socialization — to be polite, to initiate small talk, to break awkward silence — so there's a tacit understanding that an honest and/or detailed answer is neither required nor desired.

But for the person who's painfully aware of how he's feeling and desperately needs to be heard, silence can be deadly.

To a casual observer, John Melnick might have seemed "just fine, thanks" in the spring of 2002, but in reality he was sliding into a black pit of despair.

Alternating between bouts of agitation and anxiety that robbed him of sleep, and periods of paralyzing fatigue that forced him into bed for days, the Winnipeg financial planner began missing work and lost interest in his usual leisure activities.

By fall, escape from the pit seemed impossible and on Sept. 19, Melnick, dressed in his business suit, swam out into the middle of the Red River to end the pain.

Fortunately, his wife, Jan, never had to listen to the goodbye tape he'd left behind in his car.

"Something changed my mind in the middle of that river and I decided I wanted to live," Melnick, 57, recalls.

So he swam back to shore, drove home and spent the next six weeks in Victoria General Hospital's psychiatric ward working on a recovery plan to deal with the clinical depression that, in retrospect, he says first reared its ugly head at age 25.

Today, Melnick credits medication and cognitive behaviour therapy for helping him keep the blackness at bay. But now he's on a much bigger

mental-health mission: to "smash the stigma" that keeps illnesses like his in the shadows.

"Of all my therapies, there's one I value most — talking about it," says Melnick, who hopes his new DVDs, *Out of the Shadows* and *Suicide Denied: A Survivor's Tale* (\$12.50 each) will motivate others to do the same, especially in the workplace. They launch Thursday at 8 p.m. at McNally Robinson Booksellers at Polo Park.

Besides sharing his own struggles and coping strategies on film, Melnick also presents the "business case." According to the Mental Health Commission of Canada, he says, every dollar invested in mental health yields a \$4 return.

Melnick, a longtime member of Toastmasters who sold his own business in 2003 and is currently building a new career as a professional speaker ([www.johnmelnick.ca](http://www.johnmelnick.ca)), says his vision is to get everyone talking about mental-health issues as "easily and openly" as they do physical ones.

"I'm entirely behind him on that" says Dave Schulz, outreach worker for the Mood Disorders Association of Manitoba.

Disclosing his depression at his former workplace was "a huge step forward" in his recovery, says Schulz, whose boss even helped him find a psychiatrist.

Still, Melnick may have his work cut out for him. Studies have shown that only 30 per cent of people with major depression seek help, partly because of the stigma and partly because they don't know they have a treatable condition.

"When I was diagnosed in 2000, I felt entirely responsible for everything," Schulz says, "but I didn't understand what I was going through. It's very difficult to overcome the self-stigma."

And while his own disclosure was positive, clients have shared experiences that left them feeling isolated and ostracized.

"I think it's important to notice that there have been some improvements, but telling your employer that you



John Melnick faced his depression and now helps others to face their mental-health issues.

have depression is still kind of a crapshoot," Schulz says. "Responses are varied, not just from bosses, but from co-workers, too. Even when people do care, they often don't know what to say or do."

Melnick is on the right track, says Nicole Chammartin, executive director of the Winnipeg division of the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA).

"The best anti-stigma campaign is having people who are functioning in the day-to-day world out there talking about their mental-health issues, because it really is about Joe your neighbour and Bob your barber," Chammartin says.

Too often, she says, mental illness only becomes a top-of-mind issue for the public when they hear a "sensational, very sad" story about

somebody with a severe, untreated condition committing a violent act.

CMHA currently offers a two-day (12-hour) Mental Health First Aid course to teach the general public how to recognize the signs and symptoms of common mental-health problems and access professional help and community resources.

"It's just like the regular concept of first-aid: how do you react quickly and staunch the wound and then help people to get the resources they need?" says Chammartin.

The course, which is taught by certified instructors, is usually offered once a month and costs \$125 per person. For more information, call 982-6100 or go to [www.cmhawpg.mb.ca/educating.htm](http://www.cmhawpg.mb.ca/educating.htm).

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### Millions affected

- One in five Canadians will experience a mental illness in their lifetime. The most common forms of mental illness are anxiety disorders, depressive disorders and schizophrenia
- 10.4 — At any given time, percentage of Canadians who have a mental illness
- 8 — Percentage of Canadians who will experience a major depression
- 12 — Percentage who will experience an anxiety disorder
- 4,000 — Number of suicides in Canada every year (152 in Manitoba)
- 90 — Percentage of people who commit suicide who have a diagnosable mental illness
- \$14.4 billion — Annual cost to the Canadian economy of lost productivity due to mental illness
- Depression is expected to rank second only to heart disease as the leading cause of disability worldwide by the year 2020.
- 24 per cent of Manitobans experience a serious mental illness or substance-abuse disorder. An additional 13 per cent have a mild mental disorder
- Only 21 per cent of Manitoba men and 18.8 per cent of women with mental disorders get the treatment they need

Sources: Mood Disorders Society of Canada, Canadian Mental Health Association, Alliance on Mental Illness and Mental Health in Manitoba

### Finding help

- Mood Disorders Association of Manitoba ([www.depression.mb.ca](http://www.depression.mb.ca)) 786-0987
- Anxiety Disorders Association of Manitoba ([www.adam.mb.ca](http://www.adam.mb.ca)) 925-0600
- Clinic 24-hour crisis line — 786-8686
- Clinic Community Drop-in Counselling — 784-4067

TODAY ONTV

#### The Biggest Loser

The finalists get a surprise visit from financial guru Suzie Orman, who gives them advice on how to stay financially healthy when they get home. CityTV, NBC, 7 p.m.

#### So You Think You Can Dance

The judges have their say one last time as the remaining 12 contestants show off their best twists, turns and tangos for a spot on the Hot Tamale Train. Fox, 7 p.m.

#### Being Erica

When Erica asks Dr. Tom to help Kai, even he is surprised by the results. He allows his anger to take over, prompting his own session back to the day he last saw his daughter. CBC, 8 p.m.

#### Talk Shows:

David Letterman: Zac Efron, Rihanna  
Tonight Show: Charles Barkley  
Craig Ferguson: Maria Bello  
Conan O'Brien: Jack McBrayer, Weezer  
Jimmy Fallon: Claire Danes, the Pixies  
Jimmy Kimmel: Charlize Theron