

#BELLLETSTALK DAY — VERSUS DEPRESSION: MY TOUGHEST FIGHT

👤 Ryan Cowley 📅 January 25, 2017



Photo credit: Ryan Cowley

"It's so difficult to describe depression to someone who's never been there because it's not sadness." —J.K.

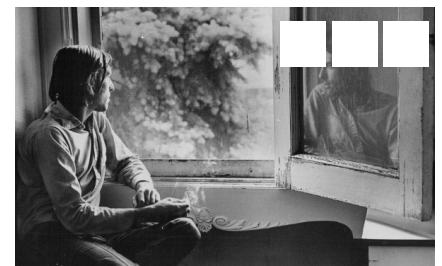
Rowling

But, for those who have never been there, let us prove that it is, indeed, not sadness, but something deeper.

Today, Wednesday, January 25, 2017, marks a very important day across Canada. It is the 7th annual **Bell Let's Talk Day** where Canadians talk, text and tweet **to raise awareness** and funds for mental health initiatives. In fact, in regards to corporate social responsibility, Canada has Bell Let's Talk Day as one of its most successful examples of said responsibility, building more momentum with each passing year.

Last year, Canadians **responded in record numbers** as for each of the 125,915,295 long-distance and mobile calls, texts, tweets (using hashtag **#BellLetsTalk**) and **Facebook** shares recorded, **Bell** donated an additional 5 cents for each and every one of them. As a result, 2016's Bell Let's Talk Day saw the Canadian media mogul donate \$6,295,764.75 more towards mental health initiatives.

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Denver Post | Ernie Leyba

It may go without saying that we have come a long way in raising awareness and, in the process, further eliminating the stigmas that come with mental health, but there is still a long way to go. So, it is up to us to make 2017's Bell Let's Talk Day another record-setting day.

In Canada, **there are** approximately 4,000 suicides a year and 90% of those have a diagnosable mental illness.

Yet, so many suicide victims have their whole lives ahead of them, have family and friends who love them and

who possess a plethora of virtues. So, why does suicide appear to be an option?

I think I understand why.

I know a young man who, in recent times, was committed to committing suicide.

Me.

I've been told that I'm smart, funny and talented — and deep down, I believe it — but there are also times when I feel lonely, unsuccessful and even worthless. Like any human, there are days where I wish I had more money, that I had made better choices or even that I looked more like a prototypical All-American. Yet, while these feelings certainly aren't unique, they are nonetheless my own, and they matter; just like those of everyone who struggles with depression and mental health overall.

Bell Let's Talk 2017 - Self Care



According to ***Quick Facts: Mental Illness & Addiction in Canada; Third Edition***, there is a **one in five** chance of Canadians having a mental illness in their lifetime. In addition, 10.4% of Canadians, at any given time, have a mental illness. For those between the ages of 15 and 24, only 18% will report a mental illness or substance abuse issue.

In regards to depression specifically, it is the **fourth-leading cause** of disability and premature death in the world. In fact, suicide is the most common cause of violent death in the world at an alarming 49.1%, followed by homicide (31.3%) and war-related deaths (18.6%).



These statistics may not instill a great deal of confidence but there are plenty of ways to combat, or even control, depression and mental health overall.

Exercising, for instance, has been medically proven to reduce the symptoms of depression, anxiety and panic disorder – even if it’s just for 20 minutes a day. So, whether it’s lifting weights, riding a bike or taking a leisurely walk, there are adaptive remedies that are easy to do – although it may not always appear to be so easy. In fact, factors such as positive family relationships, social networks and a sense of belonging help lower the levels of the stress hormone **cortisol** in humans, which lowers blood pressure and cholesterol levels, helps decrease the chance of heart disease and even improves immune function and bone density as well as one’s memory.

Bell Let's Talk 2017: Howie Mandel - Talk to Someone



To suggest that I’ve had my share of good days and bad isn’t necessarily from someone who struggles with depression specifically but rather from a functional human being. Yet, having depression certainly doesn’t curb those feelings. In fact, it worsens them.

Having had a stutter since childhood, the frustration of not being able to conduct a phone interview or take part in a podcast is what is making me decide not to pursue my sportswriting career any further. However, I have adapted with phone interviews by pre-recording my questions on a device while listening to music on headphones (I got the idea from *The King’s Speech*) while I record my questions. But, sometimes I need someone to call

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Jemal Countess

for me, which contradicts my independent nature. With that said, I've fallen into a deep depression believing that I can't do this anymore. Yet, wanting to overcome, or simply control, my speech impediment is what got me into stand-up comedy in 2006.



Photo credit: Julie Gariepy

Since speech and performance are from two different parts of the brain, I don't stutter when I perform as opposed to, for instance, speaking one on one with someone whether it would be a job interview or having a conversation with someone I don't know too well. The same has applied to fellow stutterers **Marilyn Monroe**, **James Earl Jones** and **Bruce Willis**, who have all been successful actors despite their speech impediments. But it was thanks to stand-up comedy that I was able to not only exude a plethora of confidence on stage but to tell my self-deprecating — albeit mostly made-up — stories with such ease. For example, I frequently told the audience that I was trying to drive from Toronto to Montreal

with a stuttering GPS only to end up in Winnipeg or, perhaps, driving from Las Vegas to Denver despite aiming for Los Angeles. There are many other stuttering-related bits but they're simply not family-friendly enough to share here. My apologies.

So, while I have been able to counter said feelings with exercise, watching a spirited hockey game or even reading a good book, I still have those days where I wake up unmotivated and even feeling generally disappointed to be alive. Yet, I do stay alive and sometimes I don't even know how I've done it, but the bottom line is that I did do it, and continue to do it. If it means reading an inspirational story, if it means seeing an old friend or if it means listening to an upbeat music playlist (mine includes such songs as **Paul McCartney's** "Hope of Deliverance" and **Oasis's** "Some Might Say") then that's what I will do to not only stay alive but to get up, get out and be proactive in any way I possibly can.

While it certainly isn't a viable one, there have been so many times — more than I care to mention — when suicide felt like an option. We can sometimes understand how it would feel like an option but it's not, and I work hard every day to tell myself that. Like the old sports cliché goes, I have to take it one day at a time and sometimes, even a few hours at a time. What kept me from choosing suicide as an option, though, is the thought of one of my family members or friends finding me and, as a result, becoming so emotionally traumatized that they need long-term therapy. I don't want to live with that and, sure as anything, I don't want to die like that.

Bell Let's Talk 2017: Michael Landsberg Testimonial - L...



Like Michael Landsberg said in regards to his own affliction in the video posted above, I have not learned to beat or cure my illness, but I have learned to live with my illness. I still haven't found that turning point in my life where I drop my demons and leave them in the dust, so to speak, and I'm okay with that. Some days, I'm patient in my quest for that moment, but other days, I'm not. For some, that turning point is religion; for some, it may be listening to a motivational speaker; for others, it may occur after suffering a personal defeat whether it's losing a job or losing a close friend. In recent months, though, I feel proud knowing that I've been working harder in taking positive strides that I never have before to get to that place where I can feel comfortable in my own skin, enjoy more out of life and not dread anything that's not in the here and now.

Getting to that place where you realize, in one way or another, that things work out for the best is attainable, but it takes hard work and determination not only to get there but to simply remember that it is there. Some issues may take longer than others to sort out but regardless, there is, and always has been, light at the end of the tunnel. It is a fight, though, and on some days, that fight can feel insurmountable, but that's how life goes sometimes.

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Tim P. Whitby

After all, in the risk of sounding corny, we can't enjoy the best without going through the worst.

I would love nothing more than to, one day, see my mother again and to see my grandparents again, but I want those meetings to occur under precarious circumstances. I could die tomorrow or I could live until my nineties, but I want it to be beyond my control regardless. Until then, I'm here and while I am here, I make it a personal goal to keep doing what I've been doing and trying my hardest to make the most of it, to take a really bad day and to do whatever I can to make it to the next day. I owe it to myself, yes, but I especially owe it to my parents who not only gave me life but who raised me to be a good man — even if I haven't always made the best choices.

Additionally, for those who have succumbed to suicide as a result of mental illness, it is crucial to remember that it is not our right to judge those victims. Instead, we must be empathetic to those we've lost and furthermore, we must focus on who is still with us, take their issues seriously and be a positive outlet for them.

If you are reading this and struggle with depression, anxiety or any sort of mental health issue, please reach out. Whether it's a professional, a friend or a family member, please make that step.

Desperately **yanking a bottle of pills** out of her despondent friend's hands, the iconic **Sophia Petrillo**, on the verge of tears, exclaimed, "We're not in this life for peace," and that may be correct. However, we are in this life to feel good, to feel accomplished and to feel loved. But, as Sophia alluded to, life also leaves us feeling sad, lonely and frustrated, and that's okay. We will deal with the bad just like we deal with the good and, above all else, we must do everything in our power to stay alive, not only for ourselves but for those we've lost, for our families, for our friends and even for those we have yet to meet.

Trust me when I say that it's worth it. You may not realize it right away — at times, I don't either — but it is.

Let's fight this battle one day at a time and, most important of all, let us be sure that we do not fight this battle alone.

Thank you for reading.

For youth, call Kids Help Phone at 1-800-668-6868 or visit **www.KidsHelpPhone.ca. For adults, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255 or visit them at **www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org**. You can also call 9-1-1 or go to the nearest hospital and check in to emergency.*

***For more information on Bell Let's Talk Day, its spokespeople, which include sports personality **Michael Landsberg** and Canadian Olympic gold-medalist **Clara Hughes**, and their stories, please **click here** to learn more. Other websites which offer help and information on various mental health issues include **www.mindcheck.ca** and **www.sicknotweak.com**.*