Body art memorials

When you think of someone with a tattoo, a woman like Jean Macdonald doesn’t come to mind. She is a nurse, mother, and grandmother.

Macdonald and her two daughters, Andrea, 25, and Stefanie, 21, decided to get their tattoos as a way to commemorate their son and brother, Tyler, who died last summer at the age of 23. "It’s been a constructive step," says Ms. Macdonald. "It was a way to sit and talk without the grief, a family thing that we could do together."

Tyler, diagnosed with schizophrenia, was taken to hospital after telling an RCMP officer he wanted to jump from a bridge. He was kept in hospital overnight and then sent home with a bus pass. After a brief stop at his mother’s house, Tyler returned to his group home and took his own life. It was three days before Macdonald found out about it.

"There are so many holes in the system, I don’t know which finger to put in where."

"I was so angry at how the events came about. It was just so totally, 100 percent preventable. He went there asking for help, and they said, ‘Sorry, here’s a bus pass. Go home.’"

It’s difficult for Macdonald to talk about, but she believes it’s the most important thing she can do: if people talk about mental illness, there will be less stigma and shame associated with it.

"I’d challenge you to find a family that hasn’t been touched by mental illness," says Macdonald.

CAUSES STILL UNKNOWN

According to the Schizophrenia Society of Canada, one in five people will experience a mental health problem in their lifetime. Schizophrenia, a form of psychosis that will affect one in 100 Canadians, usually begins in the late teens or early adulthood and is characterized by hallucinations, social withdrawal, and disorganized thoughts.

While schizophrenia is relatively common, what causes it is still a mystery. There is evidence that the disease has a genetic component, but viral infection or prenatal trauma are thought to have an influence as well. Recent studies found that, if treated in the early stages, the severity of schizophrenia can be reduced.

FINDING SUPPORT

Macdonald has some advice for families who are coping with a mentally ill family member. She advises: Be the squeaky wheel. Talk to the health providers on a regular basis and let them know what’s going on. Further, she believes it is important for family members to look after themselves and to seek out support. Macdonald would like to see implementation of respite care and counselling programs for those who are supporting a mentally ill relative.

Macdonald continues to deal with her loss. She hopes that talking about her experience will shed light on the stigma of mental illness. Her tattoo has healed well and she is comforted to know that she will always carry the outward reminder of her son with her, wherever she goes.

(For information about tattoos, see page 98.)

Josie Padro is a Vancouver health and lifestyle writer.