

June 2011

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## **UPFRONT: What Determines Mental Health?**

By John Roswell

The Digby-Clare Mental Health Volunteers is a grassroots group of volunteers that was formed in December 2007 to promote the mental health of Digby County residents and to help remove some of the misunderstanding, stigma and discrimination that people with mental illnesses face. Although we promote mental health for all residents of Digby County, seniors are one of our main target groups. Statistics show that 20% of our population experiences some form of mental illness in their lifetime. Seniors have a particularly high incidence of mental illnesses, and a very large percentage of them have a diagnosable anxiety disorder or depression.

Early diagnosis and proper treatment are important to mental health, but our group has a broader philosophy. We believe that factors like nutrition, physical activity and social interaction are very important determinants of mental health as well, even though the connections between them may be less obvious. For example, isolation contributes to poor mental health, and is made worse by lack of access to affordable transportation. Our group is trying to address this by seeking a local

solution. We are trying to establish a transit system for the Digby area, perhaps in partnership with Le Transport de Clare.

We also hold a monthly event to encourage social interaction among our seniors. Each month we hold a “Seniors Day at the Club” at the local curling rink. This day aims to bring isolated seniors out to socialize, have lunch, play games, and participate in organized physical activities. Most respondents to a feedback form that we distributed say that the chance to be with other people is the most important aspect of the day for them.

Recognizing that some seniors, especially those living alone, tend not to cook for themselves, and that some younger people have not developed nutritious cooking skills, we also started a *Collective Kitchen* program. Here seniors share their cooking and baking skills with disadvantaged young people, and both groups benefit. One senior commented that being involved in this program meant that she did not experience her usual winter depression — a great benefit to her mental health.

So there are many determinants of mental health that perhaps we do not immediately consider. We should all be aware of them and always be working to improve our mental health.

*John Roswell is an advocate for better mental health with the Digby Clare Mental Health Volunteers.*



## Diary of an Isolated Senior

-by Alex Handyside

Is this you? Or someone you know?

- 8:35 got up, bathroom, toast, must buy more instant coffee.
- 8:59 armchair, replaced battery in TV remote, TV on. Settled.
- 10:00 watched Ellen – waved at letter carrier – nothing for me today...
- 12:00 Did I have Alphabits yesterday? Can't recall –Alphabits it is.
- 12:07 Nice telemarketer called –didn't buy anything this time.
- 2:00 Days of our lives-then Oprah – best part of the day!
- 4:40 Woke up! Darn, missed most of Young and Restless
- 5:15 nothing on, so made supper. Bacon and egg, I think.
- 6:30 Coronation Street, Wheel of Fortune, Jeopardy-yes!
- 8:40 Ann called for shopping list: Hurry Ann, Jeopardy's on.
- 9:10 must have nodded off-darn, missed start of 'Idol'.
- 10:00 took morning meds (I forgot), bathroom, bed.
- 12:09 can't sleep, had cornflakes, back to bed.

I meet lots of seniors whose days look very much like this. You might be surprised – or shocked- at the number of seniors for whom the letter carrier or Oprah are the highlights in their day.

So sad, and so unnecessary. However, the will to change must come from within. Here are some suggestions:

- Don't wait for friends and family to call you. Invite friends and neighbours over for coffee or out for an outing. Your phone will ring in direct proportion to how often you call others!
- Keeping active is key to mental and physical well-being. Even a short daily walk can lift your spirits and help keep you physically fit.
- Get out of the house more –team up with a friend to go to bingo, community theatre, elderobics, or whatever appeals to you. Lost touch with your friends? Join a seniors club and make new ones.

So what will your diary look like? It's really up to you.

*Alex Handyside is a Certified Professional Consultant on Aging and the owner/operator of ScotiaCare Homecare serving the Eastern Shore and Metro. ScotiaCare won the Maritime Business Ethics award in 2006 and is a member of the Serving Seniors Alliance. Tel 1-888-414-0404 or visit [www.scotiaccare.com](http://www.scotiaccare.com).*

### **Positive Aging Directory 2011**

Each year, the Nova Scotia Department of Seniors puts out this guide for programs and services available to seniors. A great resource! You can pick one up at your local library, order one from the Department of Seniors by calling 1-800-670-0065, or find it on their website at [www.gov.ns.ca/seniors](http://www.gov.ns.ca/seniors)

**Out of isolation:** Chebucto Links, with the support of Dalhousie University have recently applied for funding through the Canada Post Foundation for Mental Illness and Mental Health to develop an outreach program for seniors. An excerpt from the proposal reads *“Remaining socially engaged is a key factor in maintaining mental health when people age<sup>1</sup>. Unfortunately when seniors lose enduring social connections due to loss of their spouse, declining health or residential relocation, many become disconnected from previous social or community involvements<sup>2</sup>. In turn, social disengagement can contribute to feelings of loneliness, cognitive decline, depression, and poorer overall health<sup>3</sup>. Our hope is to reduce the mental health risks associated with social isolation and social disengagement experienced by community dwelling seniors by developing an outreach program.”*

WECare Home Health Services is also working with Dalhousie on ways to identify and reach isolated seniors.

## Thanks Barbara and Sheila!

At our AGM on June 3, Community Links said goodbye to two long-serving Board members, Barbara Carthew and Sheila Hoeg. Barbara served as president of Community Links for two years and ably represented District 1, Lunenburg-Queens on our Board. Barbara continues her work as a dedicated activist in her community

Sheila Hoeg has ably represented Pictou County for six years on the Community Links Board and has also been an active member of the Pictou County Preventing Falls Together Coalition. As Coordinator of Community Programs for VON and an active volunteer with the Kinette Club Sheila's connection to her community has been a valuable asset to our organization



A fond farewell to Barbara Carthew (left) was given by Community Links' ED Sandra Murphy. Sheila Hoeg was not able to attend the presentation.

## Canadian Pensioners Concerned Update

Community Links is pleased to serve as the Nova Scotia Division of Canadian Pensioners Concerned (CPC). This link allows us to have a voice at the national level on issues of concern to seniors. CPC is the only national seniors' organization which is represented on the Canadian Coalition for Seniors' Mental Health (CCSMH). This organization works to promote seniors mental health by connecting people, ideas and resources. Winnie Fraser Mackay, national president of CPC, serves on the Coalition steering committee and was active on its planning committee for the national conference on

Seniors Mental Health which was held in Halifax in the fall of 2010 and attracted 250 people from across the country.

CCSMH is currently looking for suggestions from across the country to feed into its research project, funded by the Mental Health Commission of Canada, focused on anti-stigma strategies in seniors' mental health. Please contact Kim Wilson, Executive Director (kwilson@baycrest.org) if you would be interested in participating

## **Driving and Dementia: Not If But When**

- Geriatric Medicine Research

Researchers at Geriatric Medicine Research in Halifax, NS, have started an initiative to improve awareness about the dangers of driving with dementia. Dr. Paige Moorhouse is heading this public awareness campaign with funding from the Nova Scotia Health Research Foundation and with support from the Canadian Dementia Knowledge Translation Network and the Alzheimer Society of Nova Scotia.

The “Not If But When” campaign involves a public service announcement and development of an online resource for caregivers and physicians with Nova Scotia-specific information about driving with dementia, useful tools for monitoring driving ability, and links to local resources.

If you currently care for a person with dementia who drives, or recently stopped driving, you can help inform this public health campaign! **Share your experience by completing a short anonymous survey at [www.notifbutwhen.ca](http://www.notifbutwhen.ca)**

All responses are confidential and cannot result in any direct action or ramifications for you or the individual with dementia. The results of the survey are critical to help design future programs to support people with dementia and their caregiver as they navigate the issue of driving and dementia.

## **How does Dementia Affect Driving Ability?**

Many changes occur with age that can affect driving ability. For example, older drivers may have problems with their eyesight, or suffer from an ailment such as arthritis. These types of changes can place someone at increased risk of being in a motor vehicle accident. Therefore, for older drivers it is very important that they be able to quickly assess dangerous situations on the road, and be able to react quickly.

The changes that occur in the brain of people who have AD and other types of dementia affect both reaction time and judgement. Individuals may have trouble shifting their attention from one thing to another (e.g. from the car in front of them to a pedestrian trying to cross the street) Also, a person with dementia may have difficulty with their short term memory (e.g. remembering where they just were) and their long term memory (e.g. remembering the route to drive home).

## **Driving Cessation**

For most people, driving plays an important role in their life; it represents a sense of independence and offers a means of getting to medical appointments and social functions.

*“The problem isn’t that you are a bad driver because you are older. The problem is that as you age the more medical issues you have, including dementia – each of which can contribute to problems with driving”*  
–Dr. Moorhouse

Once someone's driving privileges have been removed there can be many negative consequences such as social isolation and depression. Not everyone diagnosed with dementia needs to stop driving immediately. **Many people in the early stages of the disease are still safe to drive.**

It is important for people with dementia to be able to keep their license if they are still safe on the road, but determining when someone is no longer safe is no easy task. This change happens on a different timeline for every person so it is impossible to tell someone when they are diagnosed how long they will be able to continue driving safely.

### **Family Involvement**

Most people with dementia are unable to recognize changes in their driving. Usually, a caregiver such as a spouse or child will have the best knowledge about a driver's ability, but they may be reluctant to stop their loved one from driving. Some caregivers act as a "co-pilot", riding along in the passenger seat, giving directions and warnings about stop lights or pedestrians. This is not a safe situation and caregivers should be aware that they are putting the driver, themselves, and their community in danger by acting as a co-pilot for someone who is otherwise unsafe to drive.

### **Physician Responsibility**

In Nova Scotia, the reporting of concerns about driving safety is at the discretion of the physician; in most other provinces physicians are mandated to report potentially unsafe drivers to the local motor vehicle authorities.

Family members and caregivers are encouraged to voice their concerns about driving safety to a health care professional. It may be decided that the person with dementia is not yet unfit to

### **Quick Facts**

- A new case of dementia is diagnosed every 5 minutes in Canada. By 2030, there will be a new case every 2 minutes.
- Today, more than 15,000 Nova Scotians are living with a diagnosis of dementia.
- More than 5,000 people with dementia continue to drive
- By the year 2030, one in every 25 drivers over the age of 65 will have dementia

drive but should be monitored in the months to come, or a driving assessment may be completed (either on the road assessment or using a driving simulator).

### **Strategies**

Many people are reluctant to stop driving, even after they have been told by their doctor and their license has been revoked. In this situation the following strategies may be useful:

- Hide the keys or file them down
- Disable the car (e.g. remove the battery)
- Cancel the vehicle registration and return the license plate
- Sell the car or park it out of sight

Learn more about what to expect, how to cope, and strategies to help someone with dementia stop driving at:

[www.notifbutwhen.ca](http://www.notifbutwhen.ca)

or call the

Alzheimer Society of Nova Scotia  
InfoLine

1-800-611-6345

## Memory Loss: When Not to Worry



One of the advantages of getting older is being able to read the same mystery novel over again—you know you’ve read it, but can’t remember the “who done it” details!

Memory loss seems to affect us all at a certain age – most of us have experienced the sensation of going into a room and forgetting what we were looking for, letting a pot boil over, or forgetting names and dates. These things are normal age related forgetfulness and are not considered warning signs of dementia. Normal age related memory loss can include:

- Forgetting where you left things you use regularly, such as glasses or keys.
- Forgetting names of acquaintances or blocking one memory with a similar one, such as calling a grandson by your son’s name.
- Occasionally forgetting an appointment.
- Having trouble remembering what you’ve just read, or the details of a conversation.
- Walking into a room and forgetting why you entered.
- Becoming easily distracted.
- Not quite being able to retrieve information you have “on the tip of your tongue.”

On the other hand, certain types of memory loss may be early warning signs of Alzheimer’s or other problems. These can include:

- Difficulty performing simple tasks (paying bills, dressing appropriately, washing up); forgetting how to do things you’ve done many times
- Unable to recall or describe specific instances where memory loss caused problems
- Getting lost or disoriented even in familiar places; unable to follow directions
- Words are frequently forgotten, misused, or garbled; Repeats phrases and stories in same conversation

It’s also important to remember that there are reversible causes of memory loss. Conditions like depression, medication side effects, dehydration, Vitamin B12 deficiency, or thyroid problems, for example, can produce symptoms that mimic worrisome memory loss. Talk to your physician if you have concerns about memory loss.

### **Walking: An easy way to fight memory loss**

New research indicates that walking six miles to nine miles every week can prevent brain shrinkage and memory loss, according to the American Academy of Neurology,

*Source: HelpGuide.org*

## 55+ Games.

The Nova Scotia 55+ Games, a 3.5 day multi-sport fun, competitive event for all Nova Scotians aged 55 and over is scheduled for September 22-25 in Kings County. The Games will be held at a variety of venues in the Kings County area, with the headquarters at the Old Orchard Inn in Greenwich.

For information or to register go to the 55+ Games website at [www.novascotia55plusgames.com](http://www.novascotia55plusgames.com) or you can register online at [www.atlanticchip.ca/events](http://www.atlanticchip.ca/events) or contact the Host Committee at 902-690-6124 for more information or to receive a registration package by mail.

The deadline for registration is September 2, 2011 for all events except for Curling which is being held in Kentville on November 15-17 and has a deadline entry date of November 1.

## 67th Annual Convention of the National Pensioners and Seniors Citizens Federation (NPSCF)

Takes place October 20-22, 2011 in Charlottetown, PEI. Watch the website for registration information [www.npscf.org](http://www.npscf.org) You can join the Federation with an individual or group membership by visiting the website or contacting:  
The National Pensioners and Senior Citizens Federation  
c/o Sandy Carricato  
2389 Head Road  
Port Perry, ON. L9L 1B4  
Phone: 905-985-8170



“Just like physical first aid, the goal of Mental Health First Aid is to offer a person immediate assistance until they can receive appropriate professional treatment or until the crisis is over,” says Tony Prime, Instructor MHFA.

MHFA is 12 hour interactive course. No previous mental health experience is necessary. It can benefit teachers, health care professionals, emergency service workers, human resource professionals, employers, managers and supervisors, community groups, and the public. Regular courses are offered in Halifax and in other areas of the province by arrangement. For more information [www.mentalhealthfirstaid.ca](http://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.ca)

**Tony Prime, Instructor**

**Phone: (902) 424-7235**

**Email: [primets@gov.ns.ca](mailto:primets@gov.ns.ca)**

### **Ageing Well Photo Contest First Call for Submissions**

Community Links invites submissions of photos that depict people 55+ who display an aspect of ageing well—for example, actively engaged in community activities and recreational events, volunteering for a cause, cooking, dancing, walking, bowling, reading, spending time with friends and family.....

Photos must be digital, at least 5 x7 inches at 300dpi or better, and photography subjects must sign photo release forms. Prizes will be awarded, and selected photos will appear in our *Year of Aging Well 2012 Calendar*. For more information, or to submit a photo, email [admin@nscommunitylinks.ca](mailto:admin@nscommunitylinks.ca)

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[goliath@eastlink.ca](mailto:goliath@eastlink.ca)  
District 2 Shelburne/Yarmouth/Digby

**Mary MacLellan**-Stellarton 902-755-1123  
[marymaclellan100@hotmail.com](mailto:marymaclellan100@hotmail.com)  
District 6 Pictou

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**Bill Poole**-Scots Bay 902-582-1229  
[pooles@xcountry.tv](mailto:pooles@xcountry.tv)  
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[bsmcgd@ns.sympatico.ca](mailto:bsmcgd@ns.sympatico.ca)  
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[d.soley@ns.sympatico.ca](mailto:d.soley@ns.sympatico.ca)  
District 5 Cumberland

**Emerson Jessome**-Mill Creek 902-736-2174  
[jessome48@live.ca](mailto:jessome48@live.ca)  
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**Sandra Meister**-Chester 902-275-5585  
[sandrameister@sswap.ca](mailto:sandrameister@sswap.ca)  
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**Alma Johnston**-Dartmouth 902-434-1829  
[afjohnston@ns.sympatico.ca](mailto:afjohnston@ns.sympatico.ca)  
District 9 HRM/West Hants

District 4 Colchester-East Hants  
*Position currently unfilled*

## Community Links Staff :

### Sandra Murphy

Executive Director

902-454-8141 [communitylinks@hfx.eastlink.ca](mailto:communitylinks@hfx.eastlink.ca)

### Anne Corbin

Coordinator, Admin. and Communications  
PFT Development and Support HRM

902-422-0914 [admin@nscommunitylinks.ca](mailto:admin@nscommunitylinks.ca)

### Brenda MacKinnon

PFT Development and Support-Central NS

902-863-5040 [nscentral@preventingfallstogether.ca](mailto:nscentral@preventingfallstogether.ca)

### Carla Malay

PFT Development and Support-Western NS

902-682-2090 [nswest@preventingfallstogether.ca](mailto:nswest@preventingfallstogether.ca)

### Cheryl MacQuarrie

PFT Development and Support CBRM

C/O 902 564-0736 [cheryl.macquarrie@von.ca](mailto:cheryl.macquarrie@von.ca)

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**Community Links Office:**  
Box 29103, Halifax. NS B3L 4T8

