

UQAM student becomes advocate to help people understand mental health

After accidents, suicide is the leading cause of death for young people in Canada. By age 25, one in five of them will have struggled with mental illness.

SUSAN SCHWARTZ, MONTREAL GAZETTE ([HTTPS://MONTREALGAZETTE.COM/AUTHOR/SUSANSCHWARTZ](https://montrealgazette.com/author/susanschwartz)) Updated: March 1, 2019



Psychology doctoral student Julie Zaky, shown here in Montreal on Feb. 20, 2019, is doing her part to change the way people view mental health. She will be among hundreds attending the Jack Summit in Toronto in March, the largest gathering in the country of young leaders working to revolutionize mental health. *JOHN MAHONEY / MONTREAL GAZETTE*

In her second year at CEGEP, 18-year-old Julie Zaky's marks tumbled from 90s to 60s as she went from being a highly motivated student to one unable to concentrate in class or study.

"I thought I was lazy. I blamed myself," she recalled in a recent interview.

She also lost weight — a result of losing interest in food — and lost interest in "a lot of activities in general." Her parents noticed something was up. Both had been doctors in Egypt before the family immigrated to Quebec years earlier.

"They approached me and tried to convince me that it could be a depression," recalled Zaky, now 24 and a doctoral student in psychology at the Université du Québec à Montréal.

"At first, I was in denial. 'No, that is not me,' I said. 'I am a strong person.' "

A doctor gave her a diagnosis of depression. She took a semester off school. Mindfulness and meditation helped and Zaky was able to recover without needing medication or therapy or other treatment. Years later, the practice of mindfulness and meditation still help her to stay grounded. Exercise helps, too, she said.

After graduating from [John Abbott College \(http://www.johnabbott.qc.ca\)](http://www.johnabbott.qc.ca) and entering the [Université de Montréal \(https://www.umontreal.ca/\)](https://www.umontreal.ca/) as an undergraduate, "it hit me that a lot of people might be going through a hard time without knowing it that it involved their mental health," she said. "I wanted to be part of an organization in which I could talk openly about mental health and speak to others about it."

In her research, Zaky came across [jack.org \(https://jack.org/Home\)](https://jack.org/Home), a student-led charitable organization working on Canadian high school, college and university campuses to start conversations about mental health and work to break down barriers to positive mental health. Its goal is to change the way people think about mental health, get them to understand how to recognize if they or their peers are struggling and be comfortable asking for help. She joined in 2016 and helped to start a jack.org chapter on the U de M campus.

A network of more than 2,500 young leaders with jack.org has been professionally trained so far, Zaky among them. She is one of about 200 students from across Canada who will attend the organization's annual Jack Summit on mental health in Toronto from March 1 to 3.

"What motivated me the most to join jack.org is the lack of knowledge surrounding mental health and mental illness," she said. "We say we're going to the doctor and, with whatever is related to physical health, we're not ashamed. But with our mental health, we feel a lot of shame, a lot of judgment. We tell only a few people. Yet it is part of our overall health."

The organization is named for Jack Windeler, a Queen's University student who died by suicide at 18 in 2010. It was started by his parents, who learned only after their son's death that he'd stopped attending classes four months earlier, grown withdrawn and spent more time alone in his dorm room. His peers either hadn't noticed or didn't know enough about mental health to recognize the warning signs.

After accidents, suicide is the leading cause of death for young people in Canada. By age 25, one in five of them will have struggled with mental illness, according to jack.org. Few will receive the help they need to get better.

"I remember so many talks about how to eat healthy, but no one had told me about what it is like to be struggling with your mental health," Zaky said. "We should be aware of the language and behaviour that might be a sign of struggle. If someone is saying: 'No one cares about me.' that it could be a sign of struggle — if they stop going out with friends, or to basketball practice: anything that feels off," she said.

"Just being there and listening, creating a safe space where someone can open up is important. Not trying to give advice. Also, check yourself. Are you being judgmental?"

"Say what you are seeing: 'I notice that you have been isolating yourself.' Show that you care.

“If you think the person is at risk of doing imminent harm to themselves or other people, you have to say something. It could save their lives,” she said. “You are not their therapist or their doctor. You need to connect them to help.”

If you’re concerned that you’re having a mental health issue, “look for intense feelings of sadness or frustration that you cannot contain,” Zaky said, and if you’re still feeling them after a couple of weeks, it’s time to act.

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Learn more at [jack.org](https://jack.org/Home) (<https://jack.org/Home>).

sschwartz@postmedia.com (<mailto:sschwartz@postmedia.com>)

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