

Parliamentarians and Mental Health: A Candid Conversation

One in five Canadians will experience symptoms relating to mental illness in their lifetime. Yet, despite strides to destigmatise mental health conditions, people experiencing acute symptoms or episodes often feel as though they must struggle through alone and in silence. High-stress occupations, including those in parliamentary politics, are often places where these conditions first manifest or reappear due to certain triggers. The very public nature of the job and the continuing need to seek re-election tend to make politicians reluctant to disclose their mental health issues. In recent years, however, more parliamentarians appear to be coming forward, while in office, to speak openly about managing their mental health on the job. In this roundtable, three parliamentarians who have publicly disclosed their mental health conditions came together to talk about their experiences serving as parliamentarians while dealing with mental health conditions. With astonishing candour, they shared their stories and took the opportunity to talk to others in the same unique position about how they've persevered during trying times. The participants, while acknowledging the challenges of managing the conditions while in office also spoke of its positive effects in terms of giving them compassion, realism, and great perspective that can be used to excel at aspects of their jobs. This roundtable was held in November 2017.

Sharon Blady, Celina Caesar-Chavannes, MP, and Lisa MacLeod, MPP

CPR: In the last few years, each of you has experienced periods of depression before or while serving as a parliamentarian. Could you briefly describe the circumstances behind how and when your depression manifested?

SB: For me, I was in office and a backbencher at the time. We were dealing with a session that was being dragged out over the summer by the opposition. They were bound and determined to keep us in the chamber, so it was July by that point. There were a few other pressures. I'm a single mom and I've had post-partum depression. Going through that, I came to understand when I would have a depressive episode. I learned a whole bunch of coping skills and tools and had always done very well.

One morning we were sitting in caucus and I received a message on my phone about an event that happened in my neighbourhood. It was a news article that showed a picture of a house, and talked about two infant bodies being found and removed, and talked about the mother. As soon as I saw the house I knew exactly where it was and who lived there and I had this sick feeling that I knew what had happened. It was a constituent of mine. The last time I saw her she had been pregnant with the second child and had the first child on her hip. What we found out over the course of the day was that she was going through post-partum psychosis. As the result of a psychotic break, she ended up bathing the children and they never came out of the tub, and she would later be found in the river.

This basically triggered survivor guilt related to my own post-partum depression. This was in July 2013, and I gradually slid into my own depressive state. I was making my way through it because we had all these obligations related to house duty and we had already been told at the beginning of the summer that no one would be taking breaks because we had to maintain numbers in the house. But it got to the point that after a few days I had to take the Whip off to the side and have a discussion in my office about whether I could take a break because of how this was impacting me.

Sharon Blady served as MLA for Kirkfield Park (Manitoba) from 2007-2016. First elected in 2015, Celina Caesar-Chavannes is MP for Whitby (Ontario). First elected in 2006, Lisa MacLeod is MPP for Nepean (Ontario).



Sharon Blady

Because this was my constituent, some people were aware that I knew her and was participating in vigils and other community support events. I was granted that day off. I went home, curled up in bed, and I was right back in that place of suicidal ideation which I had only experienced once before in my own post-partum situation.

I was fortunate that we have an EAP (employee assistance program) and I reached out to them. I have an adult son who was in his early 20s, and those were two huge supports. And I also have to admit that this was a case of one condition overriding another to save my life. I also have obsessive compulsive disorder and this meant I had to come up with a water tight plan for how I was going to exit the world and this situation. It was literally that part of my brain that would eventually cause procrastination and shutting the whole idea down. I would also get the help I need, but really it was one part of my brain overriding the other.

I was able to get myself back together and function well. Most people at work had no clue

what had happened, other than I was upset about what happened with this constituent. An interesting thing happened a few months later in October. I was appointed the Minister of Healthy Living and became responsible for the mental health portfolio. And then 13 months later I would go on to become the Minister of Health. I took that lived experience into those portfolios. I would have taken those portfolios seriously regardless, but it gave me some additional perspective and eventually I went public with it, and I am grateful to the media for the supportive coverage they provided.

LM: That was really moving to hear that, Sharon, thank you very much for sharing that. My experience was through work as well. I've been part of a team that has worked very hard to form a government. When we lost the 2014 campaign I started having great difficulty eating. Maybe eating 400 calories a day, if that. That went on for about two months and I just shrugged it off. I went to Israel for about a week and started eating again and feeling good, but when I came home there was so much pressure on me. People were expecting me to do things and all I really wanted to do was spend time with my family and take some down time.

By Christmas I was having what felt like paralysis, but it was really my anxiety. I felt really bad. I couldn't sleep, I couldn't enjoy life. By February, my federal Member of Parliament, John Baird, decided that he was going to leave. I had a lot of people telling me not to run for the provincial leadership but instead to run for this federal seat. I looked at that as a bit of an escape for me and my family to slow things down, but I still had a lot of pressure from all sides. That's when I started to become uncommunicative to a lot of people and started to withdraw. Really, if I could have, I would have just slept in my bed from that period of time until the end of summer.

I would be in Ottawa and going to my local hospital, the Queensway-Carleton, thinking I was having a heart attack when it was clearly anxiety. Then I'd be in Toronto, experience problems with my lungs and think it was an aneurism or something, go to the Toronto General Hospital and be there for the whole day. On both occasions I came out with a clean bill of physical health. Then in, I think May 2015, I fractured my ankle, and that's when things got really bad because I would just sit at home and couldn't move. I really withdrew from my colleagues and my public commitments. I just think of what I put my daughter through, having to see me like that.

As the summer started, I slowly started talking to people about what was happening. I told my family doctor, and she put me on the right path. I was able to confide with people in the mental health sector and started to learn coping mechanisms to start to get my breathing under control. I had to start to learn to focus on positive things rather than things I perceived to be negative.

I'm a productive person, as we all are as politicians, so I can get up at 6am and write my list of 10 things that need to be done that day and prioritize what needs to be done first. In those days, I couldn't even put a list of one together without feeling defeated. The other thing that was a trigger for me, and I have no idea why because all of these people are my friends, was going to caucus. I would fixate on going to caucus for two days. Ours was on Tuesdays, so starting on Sunday I would begin to lose my perspective and worry – and these are some of the most supportive people in my life. I have no idea why I would start to feel this way.

The other thing was that people in my community began to notice. I pride myself on keeping a very full calendar of events in my constituency. I will go to the opening of an envelope – literally. People were starting to comment to me: why were you not there? I had lost all sense of myself. I had no self-esteem or confidence left. I would just sit there, staring at a wall and think about what a loser I was.

When I first started talking to people, it was hard. I had been calling my doctor for every little reason and I finally told her, 'I think it's in my head. There's something here that's not physical.' Saying it out loud was much better for me. It started helping me because I wasn't hiding it.

Now, I must say I made a very public declaration about it, probably a little sooner than I think I should have. But I wanted it out there. I was immediately overwhelmed. I don't think I was prepared for it. I had a media interview the following day with someone who had been very involved in mental health issues in Ottawa. I broke down in the middle of it. I had to call a friend at the Royal Ottawa Hospital to help me work through some coping mechanisms. I've had two other episodes where my anxiety has really gotten the better of me – again, it was a physical manifestation of what was going on with my emotions and my anxiety.

I will say that when you do make a public disclosure, sure, there are some detractors; but the overwhelming response I received was from people saying 'thank

you, because I'm going through it too,' or 'your story is exactly like mine.' In a strange way, that comforts you because you realize you're not alone.

CCC: I want to say thank you to both of you because so much of your stories resonate with me. Just speaking about caucus – I hate going into it on Wednesdays. I obsess about it all the time because I always feel that I'm not good enough. Everyone else is able to report on all the wonderful things they've done in the community and I feel as though I have done nothing. And this is not true, but in my head that's how I'm feeling.

I'm a productive person, as we all are as politicians, so I can get up at 6am and write my list of 10 things that need to be done that day and prioritize what needs to be done first. In those days, I couldn't even put a list of one together without feeling defeated.

~ Lisa MacLeod

Staying in bed, the lack of confidence, the constant vulnerability, I'm still going through that. Going to emergency all the time – I've sworn to my doctors about 10 times that I must be dying and he should get out the paddles and yell clear because my heart was going to stop. And of course, this never turned into anything.

And also, talking about my condition out loud has been very therapeutic, but going public about it has been very overwhelming. I appreciated hearing from the others about that, because I felt the exact same way.

I've known I've experienced depression for quite a while, but I think I really first felt it following my loss in a by-election. For some reason, I thought in my head that every single person in the world was watching this

by-election and losing it was absolutely the worst thing that could happen to me. I'm a Type A personality, I win everything, my resumé is stellar – and then I lose this by-election and everyone in the world is watching me and thinking I'm a loser.

The by-election was in November 2014. I didn't get out of bed until February. I didn't want to do anything. And I kept telling myself, 'What kind of loser stays in bed and doesn't get up and do all the things an adult needs to do?' My depression was just getting worse and worse, and of course now I was in a general election and I felt I couldn't stop to get the help I needed because someone from another party would find out and use it against me.

“When I look at myself now compared to back then, the only saving grace is that in politics, it can't be about you. It has to be about the people you serve. So, I think my mental health may have given me a lot of humility and has probably made me more modest. It's allowed me to really empathise with people who are going through some struggles.”

~ Celina Caesar-Chavannes

LM: Or someone from your own party would, right?

SB: Exactly!

CCC: I didn't even think about someone from my own party doing it quite honestly. But the people who did know about it, including my husband, kept saying you can't do it now. So, the pressure keeps getting

worse. My husband ends up having to quit his job to help and I haven't been working since the previous election.

I win the election and things are supposed to be great. I win an election, I'm parliamentary secretary to the prime minister...things should be fantastic. And then in March I remember being in a meeting and just thinking, 'I can't do it.' It was no secret that I wasn't enjoying my role as parliamentary secretary to the prime minister because I didn't feel it was structured enough for me. But instead of saying 'This isn't structured enough for me,' I just kept going along with it, thinking 'Of course you can do this. You're a former entrepreneur of the year. You're used to juggling a million balls in the air. You have three kids, for heaven's sake.'

Instead, I ended up quitting, quitting caucus, leaving the Hill, going home as this blubbering mess, not knowing what was happening, and getting to a point where I was having a break down.

Talking about it was not something I intended. The *Huffington Post* asked me to write a blog about it and the response to it was so overwhelming that it actually almost made me feel worse. It got to the point where, similar to what happened to Lisa, I was doing an interview about it and just broke down. It got to the point where I didn't want to talk about it anymore and I actually told my staff that I wouldn't be doing anymore interviews around my mental health.

Slowly, with the medication, the meditation, the prayer, all the things I did to recover, it started to get better. The one thing that made it feel completely better was talking about it. Talking about it allowed me to at least tell my husband when I was having a bad day. So rather than hiding it and fighting it, once I was able to tell him I was having a bad day he could say, 'Okay, I'm not going to give her a hard time about not brushing her teeth this morning. I'm going to let her stay in bed and leave her alone.' That's a strategy I prefer. So now, at least he knew, and I wouldn't be cursing him and telling him off.

But again, hearing the other women on this call experiencing the same thing, that helps too.

SB: The curling up in bed thing? Been there, done that, got the T-shirt.

CCC: I don't remember a lot about what was happening on those days, but I do remember that it

didn't always manifest itself in 'depression equals crying.' It manifested itself in me not wanting to do anything. My motivation to do things severely changed. So by telling my story, I hope other people are hearing that depression doesn't always equal crying.

CPR: Did you feel there were adequate resources available (within your legislature, your party, your social circle, your health care provider) to help you seek treatment and assist in your recovery?

CCC: Within the caucus, I think absolutely. The prime minister told me to take all the time I need. Of course, I was determined to go back to work. But my family was my number one resource. My husband was the one to tell me: 'You need to do what you need to do. I will support you in whatever way I can with whatever need you have.' That was very important. Once my caucus colleagues found out what was going on they were very supportive. It allowed me to build this support system around me to know it's okay.

I think things could be better. There could be more formal processes within the federal infrastructure to make that support happen. If I didn't have such a strong bond with my husband and his support, it would have been more difficult to try to get through this. Because, as mentioned earlier, when the Whip tells you not to leave, you can't leave. To have someone else, like a spouse, with that kind of understanding who can tell you, 'No, babe, you can leave. You're not going to kill yourself trying to stay because the Whip says you have to,' – that's very important.

LM: I agree with Celina. Since people now know what it is, they are very accommodating. In terms of mental health resources, Celina and I are the same but different. I leave Ottawa for the Assembly in Toronto and she leaves just outside of Toronto to head to work in Ottawa. Some of my worst days are when I'm away from my family. They are my support. I've actually spoken to our Assembly to suggest that maybe we should have someone on site – even if it's just for a couple of hours per day and even if only one person uses it. It's a resource that really should be required. I really could have used someone to speak to because all my support was at home in Ottawa.

I had shared with my Chief Whip and Leader that I had dealt with something a few weeks ago and ended up in hospital. The immediate response was 'is there anything we can do for you?' Well, no. The event has passed now and I have to remember that there are certain things I need to do to cope that I let slide. Some



Celina Caesar-Chavannes

of this is my personal responsibility, and some things are beyond my control. So they were really good about it, but having a resource in place would help.

At first people were concerned about why I was missing so much work. I just wanted to get on a plane to go to my husband and daughter, and be inside my house with my two dogs and my cat. And at first people were confronting me, saying 'You think you can just not be here when you're supposed to be here?' And it's just not that simple.

I think once I went public people had far more compassion. But I think the opposite is true as well. I had been calling for more mental health support and I was confronted by a senior member of the legislature who said we have enough already. And that's all well and good that you live near Queen's Park and you have access to supports, but I don't and I could really use them. So that shocked me because it was done in a very public way. I felt very humiliated and regressed a bit. I felt my privacy had been violated even though I've been clear about this.

Like Celina, I had stopped giving the mental health interviews because it was overwhelming. The only one I had done after that happened when a colleague of mine, Michael Gravelle, said he had been dealing with depression. I felt as though I should support him. I was very clear with the CBC when I did it and told them if at any moment I feel overwhelmed I'm going to hang up the phone. So, they were gentle. I can take the tough questions, but not when it comes to my mental health.

It goes back to the incident with the senior member of the legislature who said there are enough supports for mental health. Well, if there are enough supports, why did a senior cabinet minister and a senior member of the opposition disclose – in one sitting – that they were struggling with mental health issues. And who else was struggling in silence? I don't want to say it's courage that makes you come out – sometimes it's just that you'd had enough. But there are people who are genuinely afraid to go public. I don't know if this has happened to the others on this call, but when I went public I had cabinet ministers and colleagues come up to me in the legislature, hold my hand and look into my eyes – and you just know they have dealt with something similar.

CCC: Absolutely. Absolutely.

SB: It's interesting that for the two of you, when you were coming out, it was very much in the moment – at a time when you were still in the thick of things, in recovery and getting back on your feet. When my depressive bout happened I was a backbencher. Everyone was so preoccupied by what they had going on and what they were missing out on because we were in a summer session: how they couldn't be in the constituency, the events they were missing, etc. I was dealing with colleagues who were wonderful people, but we were not in a healthy place in general.

The other difference, I'm realizing, is that I live in Winnipeg and the legislature is in Winnipeg. I have a 20-minute drive down Portage Avenue every day and then I'm at work. For me, when this happened, I don't want to call it a cushion, but because we were already in this situation due to the way the session was going, my community knew that I wasn't going to be out and about. I wasn't going to be able to make this barbeque or that event because I was going to be stuck in session. So, I had a bit of a cushion and also a bit of cushion from the caucus.

But, I was not in a hurry to tell people in my caucus. I was not expecting sympathy. I had already dealt with

another situation publicly. My 'gift' from my then-husband, and now ex-husband following my election was an assault. And I was assaulted again about six months later. And then, a few days after the second assault I was diagnosed with cancer. When I came out to the caucus, staff, and constituents and said, 'Guess what? I'm serving part of my term under a protective order and also dealing with cancer,' I got a lot of flack for that – about how that just wasn't appropriate. I was told we were supposed to find ways of managing it so people didn't find out why you were missing from events, meaning cover stories were to be put in place, so as to not show weakness.

When my depressive episode happened, I already felt that I had dealt with a lot of shame and blame. I kept it to myself. A handful of people in my caucus knew about it, and they had the understanding that they were supposed to keep it to themselves. A couple of months later, the EAP was essential to help me manage things. I was using the EAP proactively once things settled too: 'Oh, this thing looks like it might lead to an unravelling. I'm going to go in and I'm going to set up an appointment.' But again, the person I was seeing as part of the EAP was literally two buildings down Broadway from the legislature. So, I could make appointments, have it shuffled into my day and no one would second guess why I was headed down the street.

So, unlike the others, I didn't have the immediate caucus support. But I did have the EAP and I had been proactively using the EAP in advance of this. There was just no way to be proactive about this particular trigger. I do think we had some good supports, but I also think a lot more is needed. When I became minister responsible for mental health initiatives I was able to meet all of these people and be up front about what had happened.

Slowly, I was able to build up additional coping mechanisms and was able to communicate this to my staff. I'm sure some of them were sick of hearing about CBT (cognitive behavioural therapy). At one point when I was Minister of Health I was told I was to no longer go into Question Period with answers involving the word neuroplasticity (*laughs*) because it just works the other side up and your two supplemental questions get a little weird.

It was later, as Minister of Health, that we had a situation where a woman named Bonnie Bricker came out to the media about what had happened to her son, Reid. It hadn't come up through the food chain in the

department yet. She went public with how her son had been let out of three emergency departments within 10 days and he would eventually be lost to suicide. The question was, how did this happen? I heard her on the radio on the way to work, got into my office and told my staff to get me her phone number right away. I called her and spoke to her, mother to mother. And that's how this all came out. I was in a better place by that time and the response I got was generally positive. But, at the same time, I also knew that for every person coming up to me and holding my hand or saying that I did a good thing, there was another whispering somewhere in a corner and saying something behind my back. And sadly, some of those people were on my team.

CCC: I have to agree with that. I remember doing the interviews and thinking at the time that some people would be out there saying that I was doing this to boost my profile. I thought members of my own caucus were not going to understand this and wonder why I was doing this and making this 'all about her.'

I kept thinking, 'Imagine if I was at my 100 per cent best?' But I'm not at 100 percent. I'd say I'm about 70 per cent of the Celina I was – the one who would push through and do all the great kinds of things I had done in the past.

People came up to me from all sides – the Liberal side, the Conservative side, the NDP side - people who I wouldn't have expected – to say thank you for doing this. In terms of the community reaction to all of this, that I'm still uncertain about. I'm not entirely certain if the community understands because you have to show up at all of the events.

And recently I've been saying no. No, I'm not going to go to every church bazaar, I'm not going to go to every business opening. I can't. I just don't have the capacity with three kids, the job, the travelling. I simply can't do everything. I've had to do my best to get the naysayers and doomsayers out of my head who say, 'Well, Celina, that's the expectation. If you don't do this you're not going to win next time.' As a matter of fact, I give zero f*cks if I lose the next election. I need to survive. I'm in survival mode right now, and it's difficult, but it's where I need to be.

I used to love to be in busy situations. That's where I'd be thriving. Now I feel like I'm moving to behind the curtain. So it really shifted how I act and how I am when I'm around other people. It's a bizarre feeling that I can't quite put into words.



Lisa MacLeod

When I look at myself now compared to back then, the only saving grace is that in politics, it can't be about you. It has to be about the people you serve. So, I think my mental health may have given me a lot of humility and has probably made me more modest. It's allowed me to really empathise with people who are going through some struggles.

And there really is a silver lining. A friend of mine said to me, 'Once you start appreciating your mental illness as a gift you'll live with it better.' Every once in a while, I have to remind myself about that. But it is a gift. I have to try to find the good in it and use it to help others.

LM: Celina, I could have taken your story, removed your name and put mine on it. In terms of being depleted of energy... You know, I'm going into my fifth election and I've said, 'I've walked through hell and come out the other side, so losing an election isn't going to kill me.' It might have before. It might have destroyed me. But, you know, I've gone through worse.

I totally look at it, as you do now, as a gift. I didn't at first. But I can look at people now who are struggling with PTSD and help them. I can give that compassionate hug when I need to.

I do know there are some naysayers, and I'll give you an example. I got elected quite young. When I was celebrating my 10-year anniversary I had just had a baby, my father died the same year... I think everything just culminated that year in what I consider a breakdown. I use the word depleted because it felt like people had taken every ounce of energy out of me and no one was restoring it or replenishing it. And the worst offender, of course, was me. I just continued to work and I didn't have any self-care.

But I remember telling people this [at the anniversary celebration], there were about 500 people there and they were all crying. I told them not to cry because I wasn't telling them this for them to cry or feel sorry for me. I do not want your sympathy. And I'm not apologizing, because I wouldn't if I had cancer. But I'm telling you this just to help you understand why I have been different.

When I think about using [my anxiety disorder as a Superpower] on the job, I also think about Question Period. With my anxiety issues it got to the point where I would think to myself, 'What could the Critic, or another opposition member, or a journalist in an interview say to me that my brain hasn't already said in a way that's 10 times worse.

~ Sharon Blady

I did this one media interview with a person who is no longer in journalism. It was the most horrific thing. She looked at me and said, 'What about the people who are saying you're only doing this to get a headline?'

Others: (*Gasps*)

LM: And I looked at her and thought, 'For f*cksakes if I wanted a headline I'd go have a press conference.' But it was the worst thing. I remember thinking, 'You callous person!' I mean, nobody talks about their mental health struggle because they think it's going to help their career. In fact, when I talked to my husband about it – and he had a long career as a senior advisor and deputy chief of staff for Peter McKay and he had been to Afghanistan – I remember telling him in January in the year I disclosed. I said, 'I'm going to tell people. He said, 'Honey, don't. It's probably going to impact your career.' And I said, 'Honey, I don't care. I have to get this weight off my shoulders and I can't until I acknowledge that this has happened to me.'

I'm glad I did. My constituents have been very understanding and supportive. I've had a couple of colleagues, one in particular, who think I look fine and that I should shut up, and that one journalist, but by in large, most people are pretty good. And again, like Celina, I'm at a point where everything I have worked for in politics is at stake. But I feel like I have a life and need to do self care. Like you, I feel like I'm operating at 70 per cent of the Lisa I once knew – the determined, motivated person... I'm still motivated, but by different things.

And I have to be honest with you. When I'm happy, I'm dealing in pure joy. And I don't know if I ever had that before.

CCC: Absolutely.

LM: It's the weirdest thing.

SB: It's interesting that you both used the language of 'gift.' [CPR Editor Will Stos] and I crossed paths at the Canadian Parliamentary Association regional conference in Winnipeg. I had been invited by the Speaker, who actually used to be my Health critic, and whose professional background is as a psychiatric nurse. I was asked to speak on a panel about mental health and politics as the 'lived experience while in office' example.

While there I spoke about how I reframed things for my kids, because part of this is genetic and both of my boys have had some experiences. My eldest son had his first depressive bout during a gap year between high school and university. And my youngest one was dealing with anxiety. I found I was having to explain this to him, and I didn't want to pathologize it. So I talked to him about his super powers. I found myself spontaneously telling my child about how he was like one of the X-Men – how he had a mutant power. I used the example of Cyclops. I said, 'Look at how Cyclops can use his laser vision to blow up the bad guys. Or, if he doesn't put his visor on, he might light his underwear on fire as he's getting ready for school in the morning.'

So when you talk about gifts, I'm bringing it to the next level and talking about mental health conditions as *Superpowers*. I've been doing research to develop comic book characters to help kids with this. It gets down to a belief that those of us with this kind of lived experience, and the right supports: whether it's CBT or medications, or whatever things from the toolbox we need, I think when we have these supports we come out of it much better. We actually have the kinds of profiles of the people you want in public office. You want people who are compassionate, empathetic, creative. From the depression perspective, there's a lot of research out there that suggests we have a sense of realism, a grounded and realistic perspective.

From the anxiety perspective, I've said how if I burn lasagna while my anxiety brain is turned on, it can take the situation to the apocalypse in fifteen steps. I can think myself into a hole faster than anyone on the planet. So, for the reframing and recovery work I've been doing, I've thought about how I can use this productively. I've decided to make this work for me. In office, this becomes strategic planning and thinking. If I exhaust my brain with this kind of productive exercise, it's not going to be able to think me into a hole should something go wrong with dinner!

What I found interesting was, there were times when my staff would come in with a briefing note about a crisis with a proposed solution. And I laugh when I think about this now, but I would tell my staff, 'Okay, you don't have to go with me all the way to crazy town, 12 steps down the line, but this solution only works to step three. Follow me through steps four, five and six and you'll see how the wheels come off the bus. Two years from now, or three years from now, we're going to have two or three problems worse than the one we're solving.'

So you don't want to follow my anxiety brain to the apocalypse, but I believe we do have some super powers, and we just have to learn how to harness them.

Then there's the stigma issue. I didn't come out with this while it was happening to me as a backbencher because I wanted to get into cabinet eventually. I knew damn well that if I told my colleagues and the political staff that information, and the bias, would be helping to make that decision during a cabinet shuffle, I'd be shooting myself in the foot.

I was lucky that by gradually disclosing to certain people and in certain circles, that by the time the issue came up for discussion when Bonnie Bricker went to the media and then the media came to me, I had a lot more control. I was in a better place and I was able to reframe things and talk about my lived experience in a particular way. I could take control of the narrative and the messaging. But I still don't think that the average person who has that kind of lived experience, and who is looking to run for office, can do that... you're not putting that on your campaign literature.

Others: (*Laughs*)

SB: But for me. By that time it was 'You want to call the Minister of Health crazy? Have at it!'

When I think about using these super powers on the job, I also think about Question Period. With my anxiety issues it got to the point where I would think to myself, 'What could the Critic, or another opposition member, or a journalist in an interview say to me that my brain hasn't already said in a way that's 10 times worse.'

But at first this surprised me. I would watch my colleagues who had been at this longer than me, see their body language and think, 'My God, this person gets nervous in QP?' For me, as a less experienced parliamentarian, I wondered what there was to be afraid of? I've got my notes in front of me, I'm sitting in a particular way and focussing on my breath.... And again, what could they say that my brain hasn't already said in a way 10 times worse. So, thinking about my anxiety disorder as a super power, I'm thankful I have an anxiety disorder because QP was a breeze.

CCC: I appreciate the comments around cabinet because I'm in that position right now. Maybe about a month ago, I shaved my head, my hair. I was

having a really bad weekend. My husband went to the Heritage Fair to set up a tent, came back and I had shaved off my hair. He asked what I had done, and I said, 'I just couldn't get my hair to do what I wanted it to.' I called the Whip and said I couldn't come in. And the look on my husband's face, it was almost as though he pitied me. And I said, 'Babe, don't look at me like that. I don't care about being in cabinet. I could tell he wanted to burst into tears, because, I mean we both want that....'

LM: You're going to get there. You're a force to be reckoned with, girl!

SB: Yes, you are!

CCC: But, I'm at a point where that cannot be what drives how I live. I can't live my life by saying, 'Well, maybe I can't do that, or maybe I won't be able to do that.' We've had a great life before this, we'll have a great life after this.

It's just something we're dealing with. There are ups and downs. I can't do lists anymore. If I can't do it right away, it doesn't get done. I can't read a speech. If you want me to give a speech you'll need to give me the top five points and let me go research it and write my own speech, because I can't read what someone else has given me.

SB: But stop and think about what you said there. You said you can't read someone else's speech anymore. And don't get me wrong, it's a lot of extra work to write all your own speeches. But you're actually speaking from the heart.

LM: Absolutely.

SB: I think for the general population, one of the most discouraging things is watching someone read through a canned speech with somebody else's words. If anything, you're being much more authentic. It may not be easy, but you're being the kind of person I want in office. I want someone who is passionate, who cares, who speaks from the heart as opposed to a person who says, 'Ya, ya, ya. Hand me that thing and I'll go up and be a talking head.' Think of it as a super power!

CCC: I think it's going to take some time to think about it as a super power and not something negative. But, then again, that's the brain we work with. I'll get a call from the Prime Minister's Office and think, 'Oh

no, you're getting fired!' Then I remember, no, that can't happen. Or that I'm in trouble for something. Well, no, you're an adult, you can't get in trouble for something. It really is an exercise in taking it day by day.

There are still times when I slip back and think at how the Celina from 10 years ago would look at what's happening and say, 'No, I would never cry over this, or handle something this way.' But I have to remember that the Celina of right now has to handle it the way she needs to handle it.

LM: You have to remember that you were never perfect, but you're a different imperfect now. I think sometimes our biggest flaw is to look back and think that we had it all. No, we didn't.

CCC: I want to ask a question about the apocalypse syndrome. I found I was having a lot of those moments before I actually started talking about it. It was usually between me and my husband. There were times when I was sure our marriage would end. I find now that I talk about it, I'm less likely to go down that path.

LM: I agree with you. I find that my marriage with my husband is probably stronger now than it ever was. We always had a good relationship, but now I find when he has bad days, I'm more compassionate because he literally watched me sit in a La-Z-Boy chair for a year. I told my family I was going to be a professional Solitaire player. But he stayed with me through all of that.

And just to your other point Celina... You said the Celina of 10 years ago wouldn't be crying at this meeting. I used to be a political pitbull. I led some of our most fiercest attacks and craziest fights in the legislature on scandals and such. I was never known to shed a tear. And there I was this past Saturday, sitting at our party's convention where we launched our platform. My leader said we have five priorities and one was mental health. I was sitting in the middle of this ballroom with 1,500 people and, I kid you not, I start bawling – uncontrollably. God bless little, 20-year-old Sam Ooseterhoff, the youngest person ever elected in Canada. Poor thing, he was sitting there, stroking my hand. And then Todd Smith, who is our energy critic was there. He didn't know what to do, so he just put his arm around me, kissed me on the head and held me. (*Laughs*)

At the same time, I wonder, if we were to get to a position where we formed government, would these guys trust me to be able to hold it together. So I worry about that, but I don't fixate on it anymore. When I started in politics, I really wanted to get into cabinet. And when we lost the last election and that didn't happen, it crushed me. Now, if we do it and I'm named to cabinet, I know I could do it. I think I would be capable at it. But if it didn't happen, would it crush me? Would I lose my sense of self? No, I don't think so.

CCC: I agree. If I don't get into cabinet, if I lose the next election... first off, I can't think that far ahead anymore. I know if I do the little things really well today, that's all I have control over and that's all I have the capacity to have control over.

LM: Do you guys find when you travel you have anxiety now?

SB: I went through some phases, but not now, and not when I was in office. But there were times when I would have panic attacks and the notion of getting on a plane would terrify me.

LM: For me, whenever I'm going on a train or plane, I worry about every little step. How I'm going to miss my family. What if I can't communicate with them? Did I bring everything I needed to bring?

CCC: My suitcase is never unpacked, so I don't worry about that. I'm trying to think about what I do obsess about, and I think the one thing is caucus Wednesdays. I want to be doing a good job, and I don't ever feel as though I'm doing a good job.

LM: I'm so glad I'm getting better at that, but for me it was a real struggle for over a year.

CCC: Every Wednesday after it's over I'll go find a room to myself and just be in tears. And I have to call my husband, and he has to talk me down by saying, 'Babe, you're doing a good job. Look at all the things you're doing.' And I say, 'No, no. You should have heard So-in-so. They're killing it! I'm doing nothing!' And he'll help to calm me down and eventually I'll come out of it. But I know every single Wednesday it's going to be a sh*tshow.

LM: So, before caucus, are you paralysed for two days?

CCC: No, I try not to let it paralyse me for that long a time. Just leading up to it. So from Tuesday night to Wednesday around noon to 1pm, it's just not going to be a good scene for me. A couple of my friends text me with 'I know it's Wednesday. Remember you're great. You're so awesome.' And I just want to send a message back saying, 'F-off!'

All: *(Laughter)*

CCC: But that is my Achilles Heel. I feel like I want to quit every Wednesday.

CPR: I just wanted to say...

LM: Oh! Hi Will! You're still here!

All: *(Laughter)*

CPR: *(Laughs)*. I had other questions, but just listening to you talk and interact was the greatest purpose of this call. And just to end on that note, all of you are amazing people for doing this. Especially knowing, as some of you have said, that public speaking on this topic or these interviews can take a tremendous toll to do.

But, in terms of talking about this, and perhaps providing some insight to other people – and parliamentarians – who may be dealing with mental health issues privately and reading this... it's an enormous service. Thank you.

LM: I just want to thank you for doing this. I think you saw that it was a bit of therapy session for us. Because we're not in this alone, and sometimes we have to remember that. I think it's wonderful that you had people from three different political parties. Thank you for thinking about this and sticking with it, because I know we're not easy to schedule. I'm really grateful I had the opportunity to do this, and I was quite nervous going in.

CCC: Thank you ladies for sharing and being so candid.

SB: I think the one thing I would add, as someone no longer in office, is that I am happy to help people still in office in any way I can. My new mission in life is to take the combination of my time in office with my lived experience with mental health to see how I can help others.