

10 QUESTIONS FOR ZAHAVA LIST OF CHAZKEINU



CHAZKEINU IN A NUTSHELL:

Chazkeinu is a peer-led support organization for all Jewish women who struggle with mental health challenges and their female family members.

1 WHAT MOTIVATED YOU TO LAUNCH YOUR ORGANIZATION?

At 23, ten months after I got married, I gave birth to my first child while living in Eretz Yisrael. Soon after the birth, I experienced postpartum psychosis. Although I hadn't had any mental illness before, within 10 days I went from hypomania to hypermania, to a full blown severe psychosis, exhibiting the most extreme symptoms. When my sister saw me in my manic state, she wanted to say to me, "Who are you and what did you do with Zahava?" I was suddenly doing things I normally wouldn't do. A mentor I was very close to at the time came to speak with me, and she told me she'd experienced the same thing. With a lot of convincing, I saw a psychiatrist and then a therapist.

After going through a whole smorgasbord of mental conditions and treatments, I ended up being diagnosed with bipolar disorder. Over the next 10 years, I had 7 psychotic episodes.

Throughout this time, people were very into keeping things quiet, to try to protect me from those who would judge me, but because I was manic, it didn't take too much for others to figure it out. We ended up coming back to America 5 years after my diagnosis, and I joined a 12-step program for overeaters. It was there that I discovered the power of peer support. As I was taking the journey regarding food, I realized how much more comfortable I was talking about it around others who were experiencing similar circumstances, and I thought how much I and other Jewish women would be able to benefit from this kind of group on the topic of peer support for struggling with mental illness.

At that time, I would speak often with a wife of someone who has bipolar disorder, which also helped me realize how therapeutic these interactions are. I was able to normalize his illness for her, and hearing from me helped her understand her husband better.

I ended up collaborating with two more women with mental health issues to launch Chazkeinu.

Our first step was speaking to my husband's *rosh yeshivah*, who said that we should get as many *haskamos* and as much support as possible. We spoke to Rabbi Dr. Twerski, Rabbi Goldwasser, Rabbi Kamenetsky, and many others familiar with the field. Everyone we consulted with only further emphasized how much the Jewish community needs an organization like this. The therapists are our biggest fans because they see what it does to their clients to get such incredible support from a source beyond the professional realm, for their clients to hear the words, "I know it's hard," versus "That must be hard."

On March 7, 2016, Chazkeinu was launched with our first phone meeting, which now takes place twice a week. Because I had the concept of phone meetings down pat from OA, it was a great start for me. And once we started with phone meetings, my mind was overflowing with ideas to help this community, such as a partner program for women going through similar situations together. Today, many other projects have been created and we continue to expand to provide support to our members.

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WHAT IS YOUR CURRENT ROLE AT CHAZKEINU?

As the founder and president, I'm essentially involved in every aspect of the organization. Although I've learned to delegate, and I work with a team of incredible women, any program that's started through Chazkeinu is something I've envisioned, or ideas from others, that I helped bring to reality. I oversee different programs, help develop them, and then delegate so I'm free to work on new projects. My favorite part of the work is the intake I do over the phone with new members. Because anonymity is very important to most people when they first start out, I ask very limited questions. Instead, I just reassure these women that they're not alone. I tell them about the different programs we offer and which ones I think would work for them.

Of course, I work under the guidance of both rabbinical and clinical advisors. We consult with Rabbi Yisrael Grossberg, the principal at Bnot Chaya high school, as well as Yocheved Rabinowitz, LCSW. One of my roles is running everything by them.

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WHAT IS ONE GREAT CHALLENGE YOU FACE IN RUNNING THE ORGANIZATION?

The inability to be able help everyone in all aspects is tough—whether it's not having enough funds to support someone who can't afford therapy, or not having enough time in my day, or seeing that some people aren't ready for help.

Since mental illness is so stigmatized, the heaviness of it is like a brick that pushes people down. They have a fear concerning *shidduchim* either for themselves or their children. As a result, a parent who is experiencing mental illness may choose not to explain the situation to the children for fear that someone will find out. In such cases, the children could think that it's their fault or they won't understand what's going on with their parent, which may lead to issues at school. It's a cycle that only reinforces the stigma.

One of our members actually wrote a children's book to address this challenge. *What's Going on With My Mother?* was inspired by one of our meetings, where I said that it would be a dream to be able to read to our children about mental illness from a Torah perspective and it explains depression in a way that kids can get the awareness and understanding of what you mental illness in a straight forward and non threatening way . Kudos to Mosaic Press who was willing to take the leap and publish this important work.

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CAN YOU SHARE AN ANECDOTE THAT STANDS OUT IN YOUR MIND?

Last week, the speaker on our line was Rabbi Menachem Goldberger from Baltimore. Right before he gave his talk, he shared with us that he had experienced a stressful episode in his *shul* and he drew much *chizuk* from the knowledge that he'd be speaking on our support phone meeting to women who struggle so much and are still forging forward.

Rabbi Ron Yitzchak Eisenman of Passaic spoke to over 70 women at one of our *Shabbatons*. When he addressed the idea that we were helping take away the stigma of mental illness, he said that Chazkeinu is not just an organization; he told us we are pioneers starting a movement that is bringing the world to a whole new place.

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CAN YOU SHARE A POSITIVE STORY THAT YOU'VE RECENTLY EXPERIENCED?

Hearing our members open up gives us all great strength.

A member shared on the line that all her life she never felt that she was understood. She was never able to be herself. Through Chazkeinu, she feels that she finally came home. Unfortunately, many of our members don't have even the family support they need.

Our members range from as young as 15 up to women in their 80s, spanning the entire range of the Jewish spectrum. Although the founders are all *frum*, we've attracted unaffiliated Jews as well. One unaffiliated Jew felt so welcome and understood at our first *Shabbaton* that as a result, she's been growing in her *Yiddishkeit*. She's on her journey not only to connect to us through mental health but also to *Yiddishkeit*.

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WHAT WAS THE MOST INTERESTING REQUEST YOU'VE EVER RECEIVED ON BEHALF OF AN INDIVIDUAL?

When I was very unwell, I had to do ECT treatment (see Dictionary on page 79). Because people know I've done it, I often get questions and requests for support from from those considering or in the midst of undergoing ECT and family members of those who will be undergoing the treatment. One family who reached out to me wanted to do something helpful for their family member, so they had a conference call and asked me to come on the line. I shared the do's and don'ts after treatment, and they took it all in because they wanted to really be there for her. I found it amazing because they wanted to be properly prepared to help instead of just saying "Poor her."

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WHAT DO YOU WISH PEOPLE WOULD KNOW ABOUT MENTAL ILLNESS?

First, to those who are experiencing mental illness, I want to say this: If we see it as a sickness of the brain, just like someone who has low blood pressure, it only makes sense that we should get the help we need to heal. We have nothing to be ashamed of. As we discuss in our meetings, the first step in removing the world's stigma toward mental illness is if we ourselves feel comfortable with it, which happens when we realize that we're not defined by it.

When women say I just want to be normal, I say we want to be better than normal. We don't choose the challenges we get. Whatever Hashem gives us can make us our best selves. Our goal for our members is to remove our self-stigma, which brings to the ultimate long-term goal of removing the stigma in the world. The more we're willing to accept ourselves, the more the world will accept us. Most people are amazed at how I speak of my illness so nonchalantly, but this is a direct result of the way I see it. Someone came on our line and said, "I want to say something I've never said aloud before. I have bipolar." It's a relief to have a place to talk about it so openly.

I want all women struggling with mental illness to know that they're not alone. They can try out any of our programs that they feel they could benefit from. We're excited to make an impact on the Jewish mental health community.

And for those who haven't been affected by mental illness, I want them to know that people struggling with mental illness are not good people despite their illness, but because of their illness. For those who are looking into a *shidduch* with someone who has mental illness, or to hire someone for a job, take a second look beyond the label to see the real person there. We're not our diagnosis. We are who we are, and illness is one part of the description.

In order to help tackle mental health related issues for everyone in the community, one project we run, which is open to the entire Jewish community, is called "Empowered." Twice a week for two hours, we offer a rotation of licensed professionals who are available to answer non-emergency questions. For example, one caller with social anxiety can ask for a tip before attending a party. Another question can be from a principal of a high school who was suggested a teacher who has OCD. She wanted to know what kind of questions she could ask to find out if the teacher is stable. People can call in and ask, "I'm doing this and this therapy, does this sound right?" Or, "If I'm concerned about a certain issue about my therapist, how can I address it?"

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WHAT'S THE BEST PART OF YOUR WORK?

When I see I was able to use my own struggles to help so many people, I'm so much more confident and positive about them. One of the mantras we have at Chazkeinu, which is inspired by OA, is "Outreach as opposed to reaching out." I see clearly how giving to others helps with recovery. If I'm having a hard day I can go out and see how I can be helpful as opposed to waiting for someone to come help me.

Baruch Hashem, we've seen so much growth. Most women who come in are very quiet at first and don't want to share. Over time, they become the ones to welcome others and share their experiences on the line. It's amazing to observe the metamorphosis; how women are empowered to heal and get better as a result of peer support from literally all around the world, including South Africa, Europe, and Australia.

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HOW DO YOU MANAGE THE STRESS THAT COMES ALONG WITH YOUR TAXING WORK?

Because this work can be so emotionally taxing for me, especially after a phone conversation with someone who's suffering so much, with the help of Rabbi Grossberg and Yocheved, I've learned to let go. Knowing that these women have made their first step toward healing is very relieving for me, as well as knowing that I'm doing everything I possibly can. I leave the rest to Hashem.

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WHAT WAS THE BEST COMPLIMENT YOU'VE EVER RECEIVED?

When women who are struggling with mental illness tell me that they feel we share a common bond, that all our differences fall by the wayside, I feel that I've enabled something huge to happen. After a recent *Shabbaton*, one woman said to me, "It was worth experiencing all the pain just so I could know there's so much love in the world."

I want to thank you at *The Wellspring* for bringing this message to the public. ♥

Zahava List can be contacted through The Wellspring.