

GOOD LIVING: CELEBRATING ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE HEALTHY, WEALTHY AND WISE.

Mental wellness

With professional guidance, midlife a prime time to improve mental health

If Lisa Bunting looks familiar, credit her success. The Vancouver actor has enjoyed a long and successful career in theatre, film and on TV, most recently appearing in *Iron Road*, broadcast nationally on CBC, as the redoubtable wife of the character played by Sam Neill. While she jokes that she is often cast in roles playing “fraught, middle-class, conservative ladies,” the actor admits she comes by the tension honestly.

Behind the scenes, Ms. Bunting had quietly struggled for most of her adult life with depression and anxiety, challenges that affect about 10 per cent of the Canadian population at any given time and will affect at least one in five of us in our lifetime.

At the age of 14, she was left to care, often alone, for a mentally ill family member. Although she coped well at the time, those years later took a heavy toll on her emotional well-being as an adult. “I started out in talk therapy in the 1980s, but despite its value, I found I often ended up back in the same place, with chronic depression,” says Ms. Bunting.

After witnessing an upsetting police incident involving a teenage boy a few years



PHOTO: LYNN FALCONER

Despite her success, actor Lisa Bunting (left) struggled with depression for much of her life. Her recent work with the Living Through Loss Counselling Society in Vancouver, however, helped her address her challenges and enter midlife happier and healthier than ever. The society’s executive director Lynette Pollard Elgert (right) says, “This is a time of life when many losses may occur: kids leave home, marriages may end, jobs may be lost. If you’re depressed, overwhelmed or are unable to set goals and follow through, it may be time to reach out.”

ago, she reached a crisis point. Speaking to a counsellor at Living Through Loss

Counselling Society a few months later, Ms. Bunting said, “I think I have post-

traumatic stress disorder.” Through her work with a trauma therapist at LTLCS,

she eventually came to understand that while her self-diagnosis was correct, post-traumatic stress disorder was not new in her life.

Through therapy developed specifically for the treatment of those with the disorder, “memories (from my teen years) that had become stuck in my short-term memory, and that were triggered by any thought of fear, were eventually allowed to go to the part of my brain where long-term memory resides.”

The results have been life-altering, for her and others. “The anxiety I experienced before was like a fire alarm going off constantly, but with no fire. I was in fight-or-flight, to the point of exhaustion. As I healed, the unhealthy fear dissolved. I’m finally free to hear, trust and follow my instincts and intuition. I have a new confidence in the world, and I feel I have so much more room in my life for creative expression,” she says.

As a result, in addition to enjoying her life and relation-

ships more than ever, Ms. Bunting’s professional life has blossomed.

She shares her love of theatre and expression with children and youth by teaching classes at Vancouver’s Carousel Theatre, helps psychiatric nursing students at Douglas College develop active empathy skills through role-playing, is co-writing a book on creativity in midlife, and is part of the cast of a musical theatre production called ‘39 and Ticking’ playing at the Shadbolt Centre for the Arts in October.

Her teaching, something she found very challenging before trauma therapy, provides joy and deep satisfaction for her today. “I have had parents come up to me with tears in their eyes to say, ‘This is the one place where my kid – who doesn’t read or is bullied at school – can come and feel valued.’ Artistic expression is such an essential element of emotional and intellectual development for our children.”

The Living Through Loss Counselling Society, where Ms. Bunting was able to find the treatment that made such a profound difference is her life, has been providing affordable counselling services for 38 years. But its continued operation is in peril due to recent funding cuts. “We work with people who have experienced all kinds of loss – everything that causes stress in life, from job loss to death to miscarriage,” says Lynette Pollard Elgert, executive director. “There aren’t a lot of organizations in the province that do what we do.”

As Ms. Bunting’s experience vividly illustrates, midlife is a transitional period for many people, a time when people require support to help navigate physical or life changes. “This is a time of life when many losses may occur: kids leave home, marriages may end, jobs may be lost. If you’re depressed, overwhelmed or are unable to set goals and follow through, it may be time to reach out, either through a counselling agency or the crisis line. Those are red flags that we need some support,” says Ms. Pollard Elgert. ■

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Retirement planning provides peace of mind at midlife

People in their 20s and 30s are generally under the impression that they have to retire with no debts and lots of money, says Ontario Certified Financial Planner Graeme Baird. “What happens,” he says, “is they have children and a busy life.”

Fast forward a few decades, and as he says, “They had good intentions, but they realize they’re way off track.”

According to Statistics Canada, only 61 per cent of seniors owned their homes outright even in 1999. “What I’m finding, more and more, is that cash flow is more important than the goal of no debt and lots of money. The question becomes, ‘How can we make our cash flow work for us today and into retirement?’ If your retirement income is \$6,000 per month and you’re comfortable living on \$4,000, you’ll be OK.”

Traditional retirement itself is becoming uncommon, says Mr. Baird. “Many people who can afford to retire don’t. They keep busy by working because they want to: it provides a feeling of self-worth. Their employers get a better employee, as they’re working because they like it. Work keeps them sharp, keeps them rubbing elbows with other human beings and involved in society. They’re happier people.”

But retirement planning helps ensure that people don’t find themselves at the other end of the spectrum, reaching their late 60s without the financial ability to retire. “People who cannot afford to retire are stressed out. They’re afraid they might get laid off or fired,” he cautions.

Working with a financial planner prior to retirement provides a level of comfort as well as a plan of action. “We explore the important questions: When do you want to retire, and when you do, what do you want to do? What cash flow will you need, and what are your current assets and liabilities? You never go in a straight line from A to B, but if you’ve established those financial parameters, you can ensure you don’t go too far off track.”

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