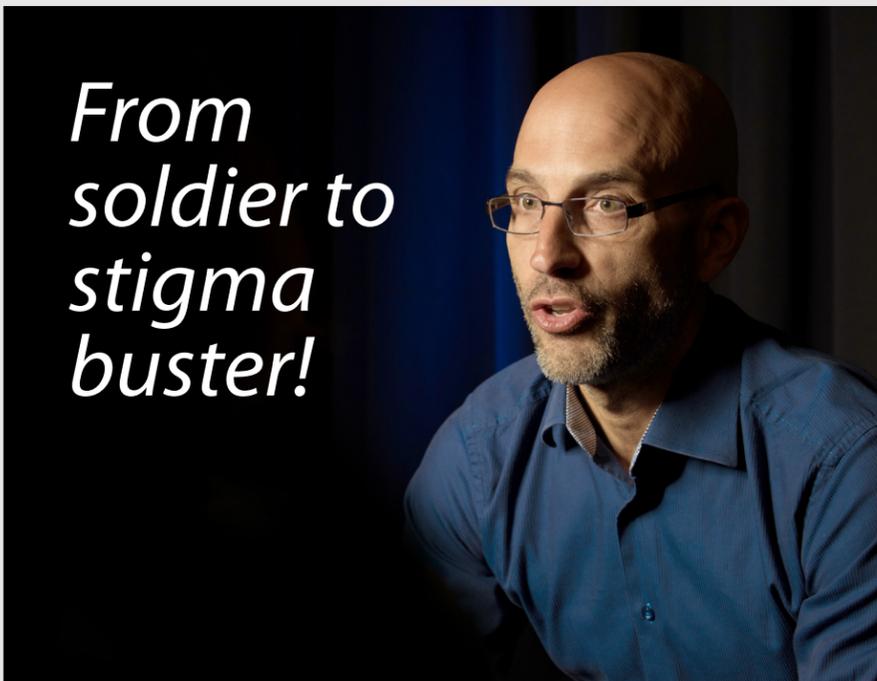


MENTAL HEALTH  
**SUPPORT**

# STÉPHANE GRENIER



*From soldier to stigma buster!*

*LCol Stéphane Grenier (retired) has spent much of his career redefining how workplaces and individuals should care for and support those affected by mental health problems. His views made an impression on Richard Dixon, Vice President and Human Resources Officer, when the two served together on the Workplace Advisory Panel of the Mental Health Commission of Canada. Richard says Stéphane was an impetus for the decision to launch Light the Way.*

*Now retired from the Canadian Forces, Stéphane has helped NAV CANADA and other organizations to set up mental health peer support programs, train volunteer peer supporters, and support program sustainability. NAV CANADA News interviewed him during the combined Light the Way/CDERP Peer Support Conference in early May. Here are excerpts of the interview, which have been edited and condensed.*

**How did you become such a strong believer in peer support?**

It's a long story that goes back to my experience in Rwanda, where I served under General Roméo Dallaire. Like many veterans of that mission, I came back a wreck. I could not adjust to being back home.

Within six months after my return I came really close to taking my own life. The next morning I reported to the base hospital. I was given a diagnosis but I completely rejected the notion of having any mental problem. I'm a soldier, right? You suck it up.

Six years later, and a couple more stints in therapy, I had still not managed to deal with any of my issues. It took an empathetic gesture on the part of my boss to give me the permission to get well. This time it worked.

And then I began to connect the dots. If I had had the social support of someone who had been there, who understood and empathized, then maybe I would have seen that my operational stress injury was a normal reaction to something deeply disturbing.

Only a peer could have convinced me that I needed help to recover, that it's okay to see a psychiatrist every week and take pills.

General Christian Couture provided me with the soil to sow the seeds of transformation in the military. He accepted my premise, that a lived experience with mental health issues can be leveraged to provide support to fellow sufferers. He allowed me to create the Operational Stress Injury Social Support (OSISS) program, which to this day provides peer support to Canadian Forces personnel, veterans affected by mental health issues and their families. Another man who empowered change was General Walter Simeonoff. Without their support, this could not have happened.

**How would you describe your working experience with NAV CANADA so far?**

It has been great. We (Mental Health Innovations) only work with organizations that are fully committed to doing this type of transformational work – because what it comes down to is changing attitudes and culture. And

NAV CANADA is committed. Your example demonstrates how peer support can lead to better workplaces overall, with less stigma, more openness, more communication, and earlier resolution of potential issues.

**How are we doing today and how do you see our program evolving?**

I don't think *Light the Way* needs to evolve in terms of quantity – say doubling or tripling the number of peer supporters – it's more an issue of sustainability at this point. The biggest challenge for any organization that launches a program like this, is to recognize that this type of transformational change doesn't happen six months after you launch the program.

NAV CANADA's strength is the gut understanding at the senior level that this will take time. You are measuring and monitoring the program, you are putting resources into it, but you don't demand to see evidence-based results overnight. What I see is a long-term commitment, and that is such an important success factor.

**NAV CANADA already has a lot of experience with peer support through Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) and the Chemical Dependency Education and Rehabilitation Program (CDERP). What's your view of these programs and did their acceptance make your job easier in helping us to set up Light the Way?**

It helped with the implementation time, for sure. If an organization has never delved into the world of non-clinical peer support in any way, shape or form – which means you're trusting and empowering ordinary people with no letters at the end of their name to help other people through struggles regarding mental health or alcohol or substance abuse – then the step is high. But you had existing programs, so that step wasn't as high.

**Do you have words of advice for peer supporters at NAV CANADA?**

Be careful about your own health. If you are in an aircraft and decompression occurs, you put

on your own oxygen mask before helping others, right? So, my first piece of advice is to take care of yourself and stay as healthy as you can.

The other thing is to keep an eye on boundaries. Peer support discussions can be simple or they can be complex. Be careful, as you help others, to stay within the realm of peer support and not fall into the realm of clinical support or friendship. Peer support is not a replacement for therapy or a way to make new friends. It's two people connecting over an experience that they have in common, and working through the options.

My other piece of advice is: don't get cocky. Authenticity is an important aspect of peer support, so remain rooted and grounded and humble.

And lastly, I'll pass along something that Karen Lieberman (of the Mood Disorders Association of Ontario) taught me. Even if the peer that you are supporting is telling you something that you've heard many times before, remember that you are probably the first person that they have told it to. So, listen like you've never heard it before.

**What is your vision for peer support?**

If you deconstruct peer support, it's basically a human interaction. It fills a void, because when it comes to mental health, we've disallowed that human interaction. We've abdicated our responsibility because of the stigma associated with it. If someone has a mental health problem, we say things like, go see a doctor; suck it up; don't bring your problems to work, leave them at home.

Of course, some things are critically medical and I would never underestimate the role of clinical care.

But it's sad that we have to create programs in the workplace that permit a human connection around pretty simple concepts. My dream would be that in any corporation, every employee has the will and the skill to support one another. Peer supporters are part of a movement to re-humanize the workplace. And that's sorely needed.

*(cont. on pg. 14)*

## MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT

### What factors are taken into account in determining the readiness of an organization to implement a peer support program?

There are a dozen readiness factors, including the commitment of senior leadership, the general level of comfort in self-disclosing, and the level of commitment to confidentiality. It's also important that the peer support program be integrated with a larger mental health strategy. An organization that has done nothing in mental health and just launches a peer support program – that's going to be a tough go.

And this one is particularly important: the decision to launch a program comes from the top, but it must be fed by the grass roots. It's nourished by information that comes from the coal face. We need the perspective of senior leaders, of unions and other stakeholders, but even more so we need the perspective of the employee. The company has to be willing to put us in a room with employees and talk to them. And some companies are not comfortable with that.

### Since retiring from the military, you have brought the concept of mental health peer support to the corporate world. Would you say it's your calling?

Not necessarily my calling, but when it comes to humanizing the workplace, peer support can be a heavy lifter.

We take a community-based

*Stéphane Grenier... (cont. from pg. 13)*

approach to the rehabilitation of workplace mental health issues, which engages employees as part of the solution. Don't just send them a survey and say, well we asked you, so you've had your say. Have a real conversation with them. Ask what policies in the organization impede the ability of employees to be mentally healthy.

We don't need to dwell on the definition or the consequences of stigma – we know plenty about that. But we need to identify how stigma manifests itself at NAV CANADA and the solutions to combat it. Lyne Wilson asked us to do this. That's what I mean by grass-roots fed. Not a lot of companies are doing this. It's very innovative and courageous.

Stigma is like a weed. If you pull the weed off, it's going to grow right back. You need to dig. You need to go right down and pop the weed from the root.

### Is peer support gaining traction in workplaces across Canada?

I think corporations who really want to do something meaningful for their employees should launch a peer support program. They'd be amazed at some of the results, such as stigma reduction and increased usage of the EAP, which in turn means that more employees are staying at work as opposed to going on sick leave.

The goal is not to keep people who are sick in the workplace when they should be on leave. But wouldn't it be nice if you don't have to go on sick leave because part of your identity is what you do for a living? And sometimes that separation from the workplace is

not a good thing.

### Of all of the problems you've encountered in workplaces across the country, which is the most important to address first?

There is a false notion out there that if people start supporting themselves in the workplace, that means time away from their job and the organization is going to be less productive. We need to flip this inside out and recognize that employees are inherently honest. Employees inherently want to do a good job, perform well and be loyal to their organization. We need to build programs based on that reality.

### Do you have any words of advice for the average NAV CANADA employee who is not a peer supporter but is interested in contributing to reducing the stigma?

I used to say this to soldiers and I think it's applicable to any employee. To anyone who has experienced, or who is currently experiencing, a mental health problem, far too often the reaction is: Oh, you suffer from depression? You're probably lazy. You're looking for a way out of work.

My advice to people who want to do something to counter stigma is to prove those beliefs wrong. Your peer supporters are doing that right now. They are all people with lived experience in some way, shape or form. They're stigma busters because they are putting in an honest day's work and on top of it they're helping people – for free!

For those who are not involved

in peer support and who have struggles with mental health, do the unexpected. If a manager thinks you're going to fail, seek some support and prove them wrong. I think that's a huge stigma buster – showing your abilities as opposed to your disability.

### Do you have a long-term goal or vision of mental health peer support in Canada?

The long-term goal is to re-humanize workplaces, and understand the value that peer support can bring. Leadership plays an important role. Those who insist on seeing only the empirical data first, probably won't do anything. But if they also follow their instincts and their gut feelings they'll realize it's just the right thing to do. ✈