Tanya Tran presents mental health workshop at the 2016 TedSummit

Queen’s Psychology MSc student Tanya Tran wants to help people think of recovering from mental illness in a different way, and this past June she took her message to the world stage. Tanya applied and was accepted to present a workshop on the subject at the recent TEDSummit event in Banff, Alberta.

TEDSummit is an international gathering of organizers behind TEDx events – a burgeoning initiative that lends the TED platform and brand to local communities to hold independently organized TED talk events. “I was chosen to attend TEDSummit because I sit on the Advisory Board for TEDxQueensU, the local event for the Queen’s and Kingston community,” Tanya explains. Going forward, Tanya will be the incoming License Holder for TEDxQueensU. The TEDSummit program curated over 100 attendee-led workshops on an eclectic selection of topics. “It was through this avenue that I submitted a proposal to lead a workshop on mental health research,” Tanya recalls. “To my surprise, the TED team told me that I was the only application that proposed to run a workshop on mental health and they were eager to bring the conversation to the TED community.”

Tanya’s workshop was titled “Moving from Disability to Ability”. She aimed to inform attendees of what it was like to live with severe mental illness, with special focus on the research findings on schizophrenia. “I chose to focus on schizophrenia because I believe that it is one of the most misconstrued and stigmatized mental illnesses,” Tanya explains. “To this end, I invited an individual who lives with schizophrenia to video conference with the workshop attendees. This allowed attendees to meet the person behind the disorder. My co-presenter spoke candidly of his first experience with psychosis, his experience with stigma, his opinion on the greatest misconception of people with schizophrenia, and the importance of family support.”
Next, Tanya engaged the audience in a demonstration of experimental tasks that her lab (Dr. Christopher Bowie’s CPD Lab) developed to study and treat impaired cognitive/thinking processes in schizophrenia. “I challenged the audience to think of recovery from mental illness in a different way,” Tanya continues. “Even after treatment that targets symptoms, many people with severe mental illness experience cognitive deficits that are linked to impaired functioning in work, school, and social domains. Imagine how an individual with schizophrenia and difficulties with attention and processing speed might experience a trip to the coffee shop with a friend. Recovery is more than just symptom remission; it also involves rehabilitating a functional, self-fulfilling lifestyle and better quality of life, whether that may look like returning to work or improving social interactions with family and friends.”

Tanya recalls that one of her most memorable moments was when an attendee of her workshop came up and thanked her for an informative experience. “She was a health care provider who was seeing an increasing number of patients with schizophrenia-like mental disorders,” Tanya recalls. “She mentioned that she would like to share the research findings from the CPD lab with her team and implement changes to the program to provide better care. It was nice to hear that somebody wanted to put what they learned from my workshop to action.”

Mental health impacts everyone and Tanya feels it was time for this topic to reach a platform like TEDSummit, where people coming from all professions and backgrounds can share ideas that could change the course of the mental health care system. “It was the opportunity of a lifetime for me to present some of the work from our lab to a diverse, general audience,” Tanya says. “There were 100+ workshops for attendees to choose from and I felt honoured that people chose to attend mine. I enjoyed the challenge of speaking to people one-on-one throughout the conference about why mental health research matters. I learned how to make people from all sorts of backgrounds and perspectives care about mental health research and its future.”