

On Language and Mental illness

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What do you think about when you hear the term mental illness? Does a picture of the homeless guy on the corner come to mind, or violent crazies in the media murdering dozens or a group of brain disorders that affect thought, emotions and behavior? There is a need for better language to describe mental illnesses – problems that can range from panic and anxiety disorders to depression and paranoid schizophrenia, all of them conditions that can encompass mild to severe symptoms.

One wouldn't approach a doctor and say, "I have a physical illness." A person would indicate a twisted, broken bone, an aching gut or symptoms of the flu. We don't lump all physical illnesses together, so why should we approach disorders of the brain any differently? There is a need to develop better terms and to provide more education, so mental health disorders may be better understood for the spectrum of symptoms and severity that they may represent.

If I stood up in a room full of people and announced, "I am in recovery and surviving with bipolar disorder." I doubt I would get any positive recognition and applause. However, if I said I was a breast cancer survivor, concern, respect and joy might be the result. Severe mental health disorders can be managed and recovery is possible and achievable. This message needs to be spread. A need exists to eliminate the blame and shame people feel when diagnosed with a mental health problem. Mental illnesses are brain disorders. They may result in strange thoughts and actions, but these behaviors are not ones of choice. Mental illnesses are real and treatable diseases, responding to therapy and medications with recovery rates equaling or surpassing other common illnesses of the body. They need to be recognized as such. People affected by a mental illness need to be able to be respected for their strength when they stand up and say they're a survivor.

People also need to be recognized for WHO they are and not for what disease they may have. For instance if a friend had the flu, you wouldn't describe them as flulike. Or if Joe had cancer you wouldn't say, "There's my friend Joe. He's cancerous." However, people with a mental health disorder are commonly referred to AS their disease. "Susan IS bipolar. Sam IS a schizophrenic...rather than saying these people may HAVE a condition or disease. This language identifies the whole person as being their disease. It eliminates our capability of seeing someone as a whole person – a mother, wife, daughter, parent or any of the other facets of their life. So what do clients, patients or consumers --- individuals who receive mental health services want to be called? We want to be

acknowledged for ourselves and not identified as our illnesses. We want to be called by our own names.

It is thought and attitude that results in language and action. It is time for us to eliminate the negative stigma and discrimination about mental health disorders. It is time to develop more appropriate patterns of language to describe some very complex issues of the brain. For those of us who are affected, it is time for us to finally say proudly, no matter how many relapses we've had – I AM not mentally ill...I HAVE a mental health disorder and I AM a survivor.

MBT
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