What it is to suffer from a mental disease

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To those that suffer from some kind of mental disorder, and those that don’t …

Let me tell you a story. It goes like this:

They are among us and around us. You might even be one … I am speaking of having a mental disorder that no one speaks about, being silently discriminated against and having people think that there is “something wrong with you”.

The objective of this simple story is to give extra insight into what someone suffering from a mental disorder experiences and to provide some helpful tips from a healthcare worker that suffers from such a condition.

What I feel as a patient

Being diagnosed as suffering from bipolar type II, (or major depression as it was known in the past) has had a major effect on me and those close to me. To say the very least, the bipolar diagnosis gave me insight into why I experienced things so differently and so intensely, the feeling of being lost, having spells of alternating “highs” and “lows”, with the latter being experienced most and just never knowing what would happen next. Then there was dealing with being on sick leave a lot and being admitted to a psychiatric hospital (which further contributed to the stigma) on more than one occasion.

I don’t think that having a mental illness is at all comprehended by the main stream of society. Sufferers are often labelled “not normal” and are treated somehow “differently”. I have had to face discrimination from people who “know about” the illness and make assumptions about what I am capable of. I have had the experience of being spoken to very slowly and being treated as not having been given the chances that others have. I sometimes have enormous ability and have so much energy for a project(s) that I get involved in, that I am highly productive. Then suddenly I am unable to cope and the pressure is too high for me to handle.

Those who live with me also feel the ramifications when I am admitted to a psychiatric hospital or when I am not able to get out of bed, or want to spend most of my time in the dark and be silent with dark thoughts that fill my mind, just wanting to be left alone.

The importance of having a support system in my life

My husband is an understanding man who knows my needs better than anybody. He has been my constant pillar of support in many ways. Seeing a psychiatrist and a psychologist at the same time also formed a strong support system. After my family grew to understand the condition, they formed a pillar of support as well.

Another pillar of constant support was my grandmother, who was my second mother. I could speak to her about anything. She always accepted me just as I was, and prayed for me constantly. Sometimes she would “feel the need” that I needed her prayer more than other times. We grew into the habit of not divulging everything to her, but she would constantly say to me “Just trust God”.

I grew up in a family that once considered being depressed as being “weak”, but luckily their view changed over the years.

Depression ran in my family, even when they did not want to admit it – or were formally diagnosed with it. My father kept telling me that “you have to speak to yourself in your mind constantly”, while my mother was plagued with questions as to what she did wrong in my upbringing. My brother at one stage, even said that “I must pull myself together” – but came to new insights when a fellow student suffered from depression. It was then that he realised the reality of it.

My grandmother’s brother committed suicide, but that was never actually spoken about in our family. But I knew.

Our families were forced into understanding this darkness that surrounded me at times and prayed for me. They also supported us financially, when I couldn’t work, and my husband did all he could in giving me help, assistance, support and understanding.

I was put on different drug combinations – some worked, but caused weight gain, leading me to request a new drug strategy, only to start all over again. This was very frustrating and there were times when I thought I had had enough of it all and wanted to discontinue all my medication.

Things that have been helpful

Facing the darkness made me thankful for the times when the sun shone, when I could smile and laugh.
Narrative therapy also helped me a lot and I began writing a book, one that I am still busy with. I hope that it will shed light on what a sufferer of a mental illness faces and the importance of having a support system, as well as some things that worked for me and some tips that others might find helpful.

I still face those dark dragons and I am still reminded of what happened that solemn day when I just couldn’t face it all, not even to breathe anymore, and wanted to stop the darkness and the pain that I had been causing those that I loved. I still regret what I did, but I know that I am forgiven and will never go that route again.

I am thankful that I am alive and happy in my marriage, that I have support, and ironically am thankful for being creative when things are darkest.

A lot of things contribute towards my being depressed or “spiralling downwards”: frequent change of work to the extent that I just left a job one day after finding myself in fights with colleagues; feeling a great sense that I should have done more in my lifetime; feeling that I was “behind” all of the others, that I wasn’t at the place where I should be at that moment; work frustrations; dealing with the depression; not knowing what to expect next: mania or depression; anger outbursts; extreme anxiety and constantly feeling guilty about everything.

Helpful things that I can suggest that you as a Pharmacist can do:

1. Form part of a network of support – listen, spend special time with the person, ask how they are, making them feel special and asking if they feel an improvement in their mood with the medication that they are taking.
2. Make your patients feel special and give them attention when they seem depressed.
3. Ensure patient compliance with the tablets that they are taking. Patients may stop taking the tablets because they feel better or because the tablets suppress their creativity, making them feel slow or pick up weight. Provide information regarding the use and appropriateness, side-effects etc. of the drugs they have been prescribed.
4. When a patient continues to be “down”, suggest that they seek medical help again – changing combinations of drugs is part of the deal and we have to face it.
5. Suggest that the patient join a support group for patients that suffer from mental disorders.
6. Explain to the family what the mental illness is and make it clear that this is sometimes genetic and other times a reaction to something traumatic that was experienced.
7. Give tips to the patient as to how to add a sense of meaning to their life such as doing art, working part time at an animal shelter or writing/journaling.
8. Provide a list of good psychiatrists and psychologists who may be sought for diagnosis.
9. Understand the mental condition and keep up to date on new drugs.

Lastly, I want to say to my fellow sufferers and those around them:

For those that suffer from some kind of mental illness: know you are not alone.

To those that don’t understand the reality of mental illness: try to understand.

To those that offer support: thank you for understanding.

I want to end with this quotation:

“One result of turning a blind eye to the horrors of the world, because you can stand only so much, is that you end up forgetting that each individual who is subjected to heinous suffering is your fellow, your equal, and that you could have been in their shoes, and that he or she could one day have become your friend.”

Michèle Fitoussi