

The stigma remains

By Tabitha Wells

These days, it's fairly common knowledge that mental health issues are far more widespread than we could have ever imagined. We know the statistics ? over the past decade medical professionals and others passionate about making the issues known have rallied behind the banner to end stigma and spoken up.

Talk is required to get the conversation going, but as the old cliché says, talk is also cheap. Despite people's best efforts, not a lot of progress has been made. Sure, people are more aware of mental illness, but help is still hard to find, and there is still a lot of stigma surrounding it.

We first became aware of my mental health issues when I was 20 years old. In the 11 years since I had to come face-to-face with my reality, there are things I have noticed about how people react.

In the beginning, most people who found out were apprehensive. Even though telling them didn't change the way I acted or who I was, people suddenly felt like they couldn't be a part of my life anymore. It was too risky.

The vast majority of people are surprised when they hear I have bipolar disorder, often making comments like ?Really? I never would have guessed! You seem so normal.? It's as if people expect there should be some kind of physical identifier that someone is mentally ill. Or that somehow, having a mental illness renders all of us incapable of having a normal life or acting like a normal person.

While it is the case for some people, it's not the case for a lot of us. Many of us slip under the radar.

There is no sign over our heads indicating we are depressed or struggling. We don't have ?crazy eyes? or look like something is wrong. Every day, we get up, get dressed, and go about whatever we need to. Many of us hold normal jobs. We look just like your normal coworkers, we smile, we laugh, we complete our tasks, and we blend in. Most people don't know that every day we struggle. The battle is internalized. But it doesn't make us any less capable. My mental illness is not a restriction, it is not a life sentence. It will not rule over me.

Sometimes we really are fine. Our illness does not present symptoms every moment of every day.

For the times when it is present, which for some of us is quite often, we have become very good at hiding how we are doing. We have to because it's still not acceptable for us to show we're not ?our best'. Because if we show it, if it becomes evident we are having an off day, an off week, an off month, all our capabilities are called into question. If things out of our control have been going wrong, our illness becomes a scapegoat to avoid resolving the issue.

Although the government and Ontario Human Rights Commission have outlined a duty for workplaces to accommodate, many employers are still ruled by the stigma around mental illness. As much as we would like to believe otherwise, mental health issues are often treated quite flippantly, with the person being labelled as whiny, a complainer, or unable to cut it. They're considered to be weak or incapable of doing the job assigned to them.

This attitude towards mental illness carries outside the workplace as well. If it's a physical ailment, we're often not questioned. No one says to someone with the flu, ?Have you tried just not throwing up?? But they'll say to someone with an anxiety disorder, ?Have you tried just relaxing and not stressing about things?? We don't tell someone with cancer it's all in their head, and if they just try hard enough they'll stop being sick. But it's said to people with depression.

We can be made to feel like somehow we are less ? less-dedicated, less-capable, less-strong, less-normal. The hardest part for me to swallow was recognizing that people don't always mean it maliciously. Mental illness is something difficult to understand if you've never experienced it or been involved with someone with it. Often, I find the stigma and these trivializing comments come from a person's attempt to explain a mental illness, to make sense of what I, or others, are going through. The idea of being completely out of control of one's thoughts, actions, feelings and words is so foreign to someone who hasn't been in that position.

Another issue is that people often forget that mental illness looks different for every person who has it. Certain symptoms will be the same, but how it affects people varies. You could line up 10 of us with bipolar disorder, and while there would be clear similarities identifying the illness, all of our experiences and how it impacts us would be different.

How to overcome it is different for everyone as well. I know people with bipolar who can keep it in check by the right diet and exercising, while some of us require different levels of medication. Some require a strict diet, exercise, routine, and medication, while others still have yet to find anything capable of helping them manage it.

Most importantly, we tend to forget that mental health extends to everyone, not just those of us with mental illnesses. Keeping ourselves in a healthy headspace is important for our quality of life, but everyone also needs to feel capable of struggling and expressing that struggle without fear of repercussions.

This is Mental Health Awareness Month. I challenge all of you to find a way to create an environment that is helpful, safe, and encouraging for those who may be struggling. #thisisMH.