Demystifying the Stigma of Mental Illness

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Like many others, I come from a family system that placed taboos on speaking publicly about one's personal life. My siblings and I were conditioned at an early age not to discuss "personal things" outside of the home, especially something that might embarrass an elder. Our family mottos were "keep your mouth shut" and "don't ask questions."

As I entered adulthood, I eventually realized how debilitating that training had been for my own emotional development. Whether intentional or not, I was psychologically harmed by my family members' demands. Being able to openly discuss personal or trivial details with a friend and/or a therapist has been vital for my capacity to use my mental acuity to have a healthier grasp on life.

Sadly, stigma about mental disorders and talking about them openly is common, which can leave people feeling alone. According to lyrahealth.com, "In many cultures, mental health conditions carry a stigma—or negative attitudes or beliefs that can lead to fear and discrimination. When people feel they may be judged or treated unfairly because of their condition, it can be harder to talk about concerns openly and ask for help."

Regardless, it is critically important to seek support when one is feeling unsettled emotionally. One must find treatment to begin to manage symptoms so that one can regain emotional stability. Additionally, being able someone to speak with who is culturally sensitive to your challenges and/or influences can be a game changer for some seeking assistance.

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Regarding my evolution, I eventually grew to understand the historical traumas my family had endured that were often not of their own making, such as racism, sexism, and false incarceration. Plus, there was an air of shame overshadowing those emotions. Eventually, I began to accept that there is no shame in seeking help, no matter the challenge.

Over time, I gained tools to better manage symptoms as they surfaced. Not only can I face past, present, and future challenges, I am able to love, accept, and trust myself more deeply because I have released emotional shackles that held me imprisoned by fear, shame, and judgement.

The need to seek help sometimes applies to all of us, no matter our circumstances. On August 1, the United Church of Christ (UCC) will launch a new offering campaign designed to elevate mental health justice for all through faith and secular lenses. It is themed "mental health is a universal human right."

The UCC does not share the position of some faith communities that mental disorders are a result of personal sin or a lack of faith. Nor do we view them as a weakness that can be overcome with prayer alone. Hence, as a religious institution, it felt important to spotlight this significant topic that often finds itself wrongfully hidden away and surrounded by humiliation. It should not be!

The UCC believes in and supports science and technology. In 2008, a pastoral letter was written to our churches stating, "Many today are hungering for an authentic spirituality that is intellectually honest and at home in a scientific era. They are searching for a new kind of wisdom to live by, one that is scientifically sophisticated, technologically advanced, morally just, ecologically sustainable, and spiritually alive."

To that end, please join me as a person of faith who desires all humans to be fully integrated physical, emotional, and spiritual beings caring for each other without shame, fear, or judgement. Let us demystify the stigma of mental illness while celebrating mental health justice for all.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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