

Marking Mental Illness Awareness Week

To the editor: This week is National Mental Illness Awareness Week, and Thursday is World Mental Health Day.

What does that mean?

For me, it means being able to talk openly about the people I love who have struggled with their mental health without fear that they, or I, will be judged. It means being able to tell people my cousin was diagnosed with schizophrenia as a college student in the mid-1970s. It means being able to mention another cousin died by suicide at age 55. It means acknowledging the pain of having estranged family members. It means being able to talk about my own struggles with depression without fear of losing a job or of not getting a job in the first place. It means telling people I have been hospitalized for depression and that hospitalization helped. It means being able to discuss mental health the way we discuss physical health, and for that discussion to evoke sympathy rather than devaluation or confusion or awkwardness or even silence.

Mental illness does not discriminate on the basis of intelligence, income, career path, age, gender, sexuality or race; it is an equal-opportunity predator. The impact of mental illness can differ tremendously from one person to another, from one family to another, from one community to another. Fortunately, there are available treatments, and resources and help for those who suffer and for their caregivers. But it requires courage to reach out. We can all make reaching out easier by listening to stories of mental illness with more compassion and grace.

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