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Journal 7: What are you willing to fight for and why?

I am willing to fight for the awareness and destigmatization of mental illness. Of all the things in the world that are worth fighting for, this issue is important to me personally because of my experiences with friends and family members who struggle with chronic mental illnesses. I defy anyone to watch a person they love suffer and not become passionate about what is causing their loved one’s pain. I could rant for several pages- and I have before- about how cruel and unfair mental illness is, but instead I will try to present a more ordered explanation of why stigmas and a general lack of awareness are so worth amending, despite the fact that they do not directly cause mental illness.

Western society has come a long way in its treatment of mental illness in what is a fairly short period of time, given the age of our society. Up until the academic field of neurology came into existence in the early 1800’s, people with severe mental illnesses were locked up in institutions where they were kept in the most inhumane conditions imaginable.[[1]](#footnote-0) While the scientific community now recognizes that mental illnesses are caused by biological and psychological factors that are treatable or manageable, and laws now grant people with mental illnesses rights over what happens to them, there is still crippling ignorance and stigma surrounding them in a far too large portion of the population. This is largely because, unlike most physical illnesses, mental illnesses cannot be seen, so far too many people have difficulty believing that they are legitimate. Unlike most physical maladies, mental illnesses are invisible; when someone says they have a fever, there is physical proof, so we don’t tell them that they probably just need to drink some cold water, sit in front of a fan, and get over themselves. But when someone says that they experience crippling anxiety, intrusive thoughts, or don’t have the willpower to get out of bed, there is no proof other than the person’s word, so it is easy for people who are not educated about the physiological aspects of mental illness to dismiss these problems as weakness or laziness.

This attitude that mental illness does not exist or is not a legitimate type of disease is incredibly harmful. It can prevent people from being diagnosed or seeking treatment, because they are taught that the symptoms they experience are either nothing out of the ordinary, or weaknesses to be dealt with in private. Adding guilt, shame, and self-doubt onto the plate of people who are already dealing with a disease that attacks their ability to think, feel, and experience life is horrible, and the effects are heartbreaking to witness. As just one example, I sat once with a friend who had been diagnosed several years before with a serious anxiety disorder, but whose parents approached the symptoms as something she just needed to suck up and deal with. I listened as she, a normally reserved person, cried about how she felt she did not deserve to seek inpatient care for her worsening illness because her problems were supposedly “not bad enough.”

If more people were educated about the biological and environmental causes of mental illness and the ways in which it affects the body and brain, they would be less likely to dismiss the debilitating daily reality that people with mental illness face. Moreover, if people were taught how to approach those with mental illnesses, how to discuss mental health, and how to actively help the people they know who have mental illnesses cope, traversing society would be so much more comfortable for people with mental illnesses. This all needs to be taught in schools just as much as sexual education and substance use, and from an even younger age. Children need to be taught early that people who have mental illnesses are still people, and they need to be taught what to notice in themselves and their friends so that if need be, they can- without shame- seek the help they need and deserve in order to live the healthiest lives possible.

1. The word “bedlam” is actually derived from the cockney pronunciation of “Bethlehem,” the shortened name of the noisy, filthy, chaotic St. Mary of Bethlehem hospital in London where “insane” persons were locked up together. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)