

The silent stigma



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

I stood there in front of about two-hundred colleagues and guests. I could feel the sweat under my arms dampening my shirt and I began to feel as though I were in a tunnel. All I could see was a blurred line of light straight in front of me and my voice echoed in my head like I was speaking into a bucket.

I was there to speak on my personal experience with depression and anxiety. In retrospect, I realize that this was a huge mistake, at least in light of the way society thinks. Or perhaps I should moderate that statement. It has demonstrated to have been a mistake with some people.

When I was extremely depressed, I noticed some friends disappeared. I understand that they couldn't cope with my depression and removed themselves from it. In a few instances the dismissal was rude and malicious and those who had seemed to be friends turned out not to be. Other friends stayed and offered their help. When the depression started to lift, I noticed the observable fact that all those who suffer from some type of mental illness suffer. Now that people were aware of my illness they treated me in a different way. There were times I felt like I no longer belonged nor was I wanted. I would be treated with a briskness and flippant air that I had never felt before.

I was being rudely dismissed and ignored on special occasions. My mere presence was clearly thought to be potentially threatening. Maybe I wouldn't be happy enough or would introduce out of place topics.

I had laid my weakness down for everyone to see and people were not about to forget it. These people, like most, probably thought this was the right

thing to do. They were saving others from the drama that was me. They also probably believed they were treating me as I deserved. I had permanently lost any respect and consideration that I had once received. From others I received a different kind of treatment. When I was doing well, these people thought it was time to let me know all the ways that I should improve myself.

Their intentions were clearly kind and generous. They didn't want me to become depressed again. They would mention one issue after another that they felt I should change. On one hand, I was touched that someone cared enough to make these suggestions.

On the other hand, I felt attacked. Like I had become a fair game for others to criticize because of my illness. Abundant advice given to a depressed person can prove damaging to recovery. I can't change my past nor my childhood background. I could make changes in my current behavior but whether this behavior should be the center of focus during recovery is certainly questionable. When you are given such a profuse amount of advice, you can't help but feel a loss of dignity and respect.

And yet the person advising you expects gratitude for the trouble taken and wisdom offered. I had an overwhelming feeling of vulnerability. The last thing I wanted was to be sick. With all the advice I received, I had to consider: What should I do Should I make these changes Should I start participating in that or establish that relationship I was afraid to act and not to act.

What if the advice was wrong What if these new suggestions are counter-productive The advice felt to be coming in a confident and assertive manner which was certainly not where I was. This air made the advice seem correct

but it also involved suggestions I wasn't sure I could put into practice. What would be best I needed quiet support. You are getting better! How wonderful! When I express my fears that the illness will recur, encouraging words are best. Don't think of the dark times any more.

Be confident. Trust that you will be well. Only when I've been well for several months is advice suitable to be offered and then, only if requested. It has become very clear to me the reason people mask serious illnesses, whether cancer, heart disease, diabetes, or mental illness. Once uncovered, these illnesses show to be etched in the minds of others.

People never feel the same dignity again. Their Achilles heel has been exposed and it is this that others always scrutinize. To some this weak spot justifies conduct that shows no respect to the person as a human being. From whatever reasons the person is seen to be accountable for the weakness and consequently fittingly blamed.

The person has lost the right to be treated with respect. This respect is offered only to those who are strong, healthy, and successful. To others the weakness screams the need to change. The weakness must become strength again and only then will the person be treated as someone worthy of respect. If illness happens to be an incident that merrily comes to an end, even then it is never acceptable to be gone.

If signs of mental illness return, for example, instantaneously the person is accused of not taking the advice that was given long ago and being accountable for the current condition. We all need to appreciate the road that any suffering person travels. If we don't travel that way, our hearts

should be thankful and full of empathy for those who do. Human nature is too delicate and weak for anyone to deduce that they will never be in that position. With a mind that perceives that any suffering could be ours, we should all hold out a helping hand to those in need.

We must place ourselves with, never above another, because one day we may be the ones in the lowest spot.