**Shining a Light on Mental Illness and Stigma**

**Words:** 565

*Op-eds are opinion pieces—not rants, but strongly worded articles that often express a unique point of view. Feel free to customize the article below on shining a light on stigma to eradicate it and submit it to a newspaper, magazine, or blog. You can make it stronger by including your own story about addressing a mental illness—whether your own or a loved one’s illness—and the views of clients or others. Personalizing articles with quotes and examples that illustrate the points made in the article will increase the chances that the article will be considered for publication.*

*Here’s an excerpt of what* The New York Times *has to say about op-eds (at* [*http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/14/opinion/op-ed-and-you.html?\_r=0*](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/14/opinion/op-ed-and-you.html?_r=0)*):*

*“We need a diversity of voices and opinions about a range of topics. Anything can be an Op-Ed. We’re not only interested in policy, politics or government. We’re interested in everything, if it’s opinionated and we believe our readers will find it worth reading. We are especially interested in finding points of view that are different from those expressed in Times editorials. …*

*“We get a flood of submissions, but there’s never too much good writing in the world. There is always room for more. … Most pieces we publish are between 400 and 1200 words. They can be longer when they arrive, but not so long that they’re traumatizing. Submissions that are reacting to news of the world are of great value to us, especially if they arrive very quickly. Write in your own voice. If you’re funny, be funny. Don’t write the way you think important people write, or the way you think important pieces should sound.*

*“And it’s best to focus very specifically on something; if you write about the general problem of prisons in the United States, the odds are that it will seem too familiar. But if you are a prisoner in California and you have just gone on a hunger strike and you want to tell us about it – now, that we would like to read. We are normal humans (relatively speaking). We like to read conversational English that pulls us along. That means that if an article is written with lots of jargon, we probably won’t like it. …*

*“… [W]e won’t run something that has appeared in another publication, either print or digital. We request that you disclose anything that might be seen as a conflict of interest, financial or otherwise: … Could you or an organization or company you represent benefit from the stance you take in an Op-Ed? We need to know. That doesn’t mean we’ll throw out your article on that basis — in most cases it just means disclosing the relationship to the reader. We also need all of the material that supports the facts in your story. That’s the biggest surprise to some people. Yes, we do fact check.”*

**Shining a Light on Mental Illness and Stigma**

Being ashamed of relatives with mental illness was once so common that we have a colloquial expression for it: “the crazy uncle in the attic.” It conveys how we used to literally hide away people with mental illness, as well as embarrassment and lack of empathy for their condition. We’ve come a long way since then!

Evidence-based treatment works, recovery is possible, and there’s a greater awareness of mental illness. (There should be since mental illness is pretty common: Nearly one in four Americans are affected by mental illness annually, according to the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), and one in 17 lives with a major mental-health illness such as depression, bipolar disorder, or schizophrenia. Close to 20 percent of teens aged 13-18 cope with mental illness annually, and about 18 percent of adults cope with anxiety disorders.)

But that’s not enough. For people suffering from depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, and other mental health conditions, the stigma of their condition still has an isolating effect. It also prevents many from getting the help they need to put them on the road of recovery. That is the wrong kind of prevention!

We need to shine a light on the stigma that is still entrenched in attitudes toward people with a mental-health condition and eradicate it. Research confirms that harboring stigma negatively affects those afflicted with a mental-health condition. Treating people with mental-health conditions as outcasts can exacerbate their depression and increase the risk of suicidal thoughts and suicide itself.

**An Unlevel Playing Field**

Individuals who are open about their mental-health conditions are more resilient, even in the face of others’ criticisms.

“I'm on the brink of a career-ending injury according to pundits," said Arian Foster, a running-back for the Houston Texans. He turned to counseling when his problems threatened to overwhelm him, calling it “the best decision I ever made,” according to an Associated Press (AP) article.

"I'm divorced. I'm supposed to be underneath the table drinking myself to death. But I've never been happier, and it's because of the work I've put in and the want to change my life,” said Foster in the AP article. Foster has since joined fellow football player Brandon Marshall’s organization, Project 375.org, which is dedicated to “eradicating the stigma surrounding mental health by raising awareness and improving care for those in need.”

A New York Jets wide receiver diagnosed with borderline personality disorder (BPD) in 2011, Marshall called for “check-ups from the neck up” in an April 28, 2016, speech before the U.S. Senate Committee on Finance.

Awareness and acceptance of mental illness as a part of our society has continued to grow with the help of celebrities, athletes, and public figures who speak out about the impact of mental illness on their lives. The media, especially the Internet and television, are effective at spreading awareness and tolerance of mental health disorders, though substantial stigma and discrimination surrounding mental illness remain.

The perspective on being depressed expressed by “Harry Potter” author J.K, Rowling gives me hope that we can cast a “vanishing spell” on stigma: “What’s to be ashamed of? I went through a really rough time, and I am quite proud that I got out of that,” she told a student journalist in 2008, the AP reports.

Let’s break the silence, open the attic door, and stamp out stigma around mental health once and for all.

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