

# Taking the First Step: Overcoming Stigma

by Stacy Hollingsworth

It's a feeling I've come to know well—the knot in my stomach, the palpitations, the racing thoughts that question the potential consequences of what I'm about to do. Should I tell them? Is it possible they'll understand what I'm going through? Will they think any less of me once they find out? Questions such as these run through my mind every time an otherwise uneventful conversation suddenly turns into a highly personal one, oftentimes beginning with the phrase “I have a mental illness.”

By the time I entered high school, I knew something was wrong. I noticed that I was depressed more often than not, was disinterested in activities I once enjoyed, and wanted to spend considerable time alone. After researching disorders on the Internet, I finally realized that I was facing a severe case of major depressive disorder. No matter how hard I tried, I could not identify a single cause or event that was responsible for the tremendous pain I was experiencing. It didn't make any sense to me. My life was just so picture perfect, and yet there I was, so miserable. I nearly convinced myself that things would get better without appropriate intervention, as my condition continued to deteriorate.

Because of the stigma surrounding mental illness, I felt compelled to hide my suffering from the outside world; even those closest to me were unaware of my battle with depression. However, I could not hide from the fact that I was a walking time bomb. I was desperate for an end to the immense pain and therefore spent much of my time pondering suicide.

Unlike many of my peers, for whom college represented independence, exciting new social opportunities, and an intellectually stimulating atmosphere, my personal transition into college was most notably a symbol of my

entrance into the mental health care system—an opportunity to reclaim the life that had been stolen from me as a result of the depression.

I still recall the first day I set foot into a counseling center on campus. I somewhat reluctantly got off the shuttle bus and quickly made sure no one who knew me saw where I was headed. At first, opening up about the illness was incredibly awkward. I was so nervous that I'm not even sure I was speaking in coherent sentences. Since then, though, I've had plenty of opportunities to discuss the illness with psychiatrists, therapists, and other people suffering from mental illness.


Because I was relatively treatment resistant, it took a lot of patience to get through the many failed treatment attempts, which included a variety of different medications, repetitive transcranial magnetic stimulation, acupuncture, and electroconvulsive therapy (ECT). Electroconvulsive therapy, also referred to as “shock therapy,” has quite a controversial history that extends into present day. So, in addition to the fact that I was coping with a stigmatized illness, I was now also undergoing a rather stigmatized treatment. The use of medications in treating depression has gained acceptance in society, but shocking the brain? How barbaric, right?! Ironically, in our culture, it's perfectly acceptable to shock a heart in order to save someone's life, but it's not okay to shock a brain. Remember, the brain is an organ, too. Although ECT was personally ineffective, it did serve as a reminder that what I was dealing with was a disabling medical disorder—not a character flaw.

Getting comfortable with the disorder to the point where you can speak about it openly does not happen overnight. It's a process, but one that does get easier over time. For me, it first took personal acceptance of the



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disorder, followed by the recognition that not everyone out there will understand or will want to understand the nature of the disorder. We cannot blame them—they haven't been educated about mental illness. All we can do is be ourselves. We shouldn't have to apologize for having to deal with a disorder that was uninvited in the first place.

Early intervention can improve your overall prognosis—not to mention spare you years of suffering. You have to ask yourself what's more important—that everyone thinks you're doing well...or that you truly are doing well. This illness IS treatable. You CAN feel better. What are you waiting for? 

*Editor's Note:* Ms. Hollingsworth is a junior at Rutgers University in New Jersey, where she is starting a NAMI Campus-Based Affiliate. NAMI-Rutgers will open its “doors” to students and faculty in the fall and already has quite a bit of interest on campus and an ambitious line-up of activities. NAMI-Rutgers will educate the campus community about mental illnesses, promote the early detection of mental illnesses and early intervention, provide support for students with mental illnesses, reach out to family members and friends of students living with mental illnesses and combat the unfortunate stigma that continues to exist with these illnesses.