

GETTING HELP

Coping with and Overcoming Mental Illness



Carla Mooney

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CHAPTER TWO

Overcoming the Stigma of Mental Illness

When Vic started high school, he began to feel increasingly anxious. His class schedule overwhelmed him, and he struggled to keep up with his classmates. Unhappy, he started having trouble sleeping at night. And he began to hide in the bathroom during class to avoid contact with peers and teachers.

When Vic tried to talk to his family and friends about his anxiety at school, they told him to calm down and dismissed his feelings. One family member accused Vic of making up his mental health troubles to get extra attention. “This was very hard on me,” Vic says. “I began to refrain from telling people how I felt. This only made me feel worse about myself. I started to feel very depressed. While I felt this way, I put on a facade like nothing was wrong.”²¹

In college, Vic’s mental health problems worsened. His anxiety made him too nervous to interact with other students, making it difficult to make new friends. To escape, Vic walked around campus with his head and eyes down so he would not have to make eye contact. Other times, he hid alone in his dorm room. Vic’s depression and anxiety increasingly began to impact his daily life. “There would be points where I didn’t

even get out of bed in the morning to go to class. I felt paralyzed when I woke up,” he says. To escape, Vic turned to binge drinking alcohol. “While the alcohol helped in the moment, I always felt worse off afterwards,”²² he says. Feeling hopeless, Vic thought about suicide.

For years Vic’s negative experiences talking to family and friends about his mental health had stopped him from seeking help. Now he decided to visit the counseling center at his university. He says:

I remember my first appointment vividly. I had walked in and burst into tears about how I felt. The counselor was very understanding, and I learned that I had Generalized Anxiety Disorder or GAD. I continued to seek counseling services after this appointment and began opening up to some of my classmates about how I felt. To my surprise, some of them had felt this way too and were very open with me talking about this.²³

Vic finally found the support he needed at the counseling center to talk through his feelings and learned healthy ways to channel his emotions. He started to exercise regularly and ate better. He also started taking antianxiety medications. Volunteering with local nonprofit organizations helped give him a sense of purpose. While Vic still experiences anxiety today, he has learned how to deal with his mental health through treatment and counseling so that it no longer derails his daily life.

Fear and Stigma

For most people the first step in facing mental illness is recognizing the condition and knowing when to seek help. However, as Vic experienced, the stigma of mental illness and other barriers to treatment often prevent people from getting help when they need it. According to the American Psychiatric Association, more



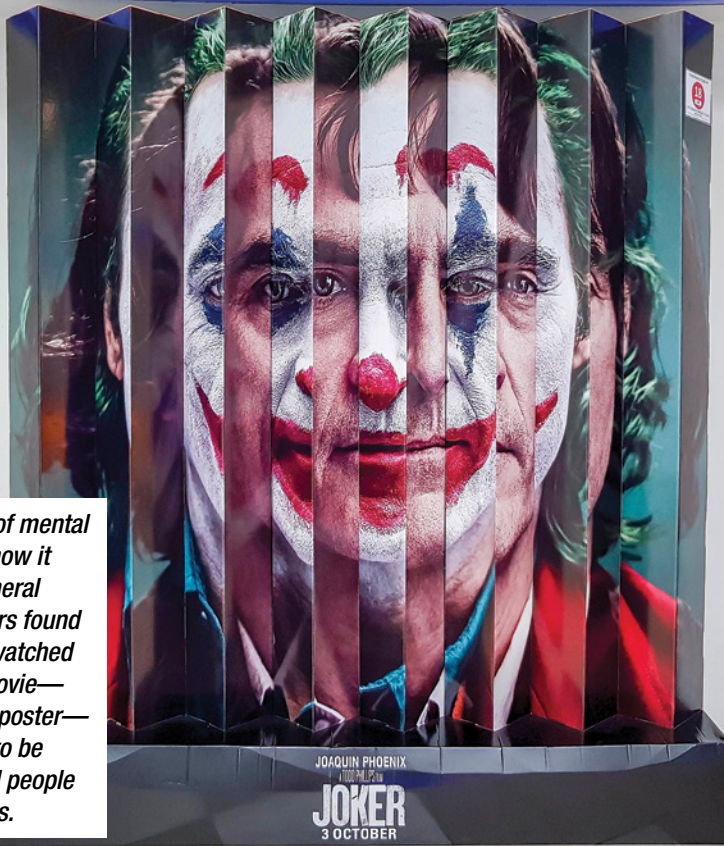
Young people with mental health issues such as depression and anxiety may start avoiding interaction with their peers because that interaction can be stressful for them.

than half of people with mental illness do not receive help for their conditions. Often, people may not seek treatment or may delay needed treatment because they are afraid of what others will think about them or are ashamed to admit they have a problem. Many people fear that admitting to mental illness will cause others to treat them differently or even cost them their job.

Stigma occurs when someone views another person negatively because of a specific characteristic or personal trait. Stigma can lead to prejudice and discrimination. Sometimes, discrimination can be direct, such as when someone makes a negative comment about a person's mental illness or treatment. Other times, discrimination can be more subtle, perhaps avoiding others who might be mentally ill because of an assumption that they could be unstable or violent.

Fear and stigma surrounding mental illness often occur because people do not understand mental illness. It may be difficult for others to understand why someone cannot just "snap out of it" or "stop

Media portrayals of mental illness influence how it is seen by the general public. Researchers found that people who watched the 2019 Joker movie—advertised in this poster—were more likely to be prejudiced toward people with mental illness.



feeling sad” when they have not experienced mental health problems themselves. Also, misunderstanding of mental illness is often made worse by misleading portrayals of mental illness in the media. In a study published in 2020, researchers examined the effect of the 2019 movie *Joker* on how people saw mental illness. The lead character has a mental illness in the movie and becomes extremely violent. Researchers found that people who watched the film were more likely to have higher levels of prejudice toward people with mental illness than those who did not watch the movie.

Growing Up with Stigma

Every culture views mental health differently. In many cultures, there is a stigma around mental health, and mental health problems are viewed as a weakness and something to hide. In some cultures, seeking mental health treatment is viewed as bringing

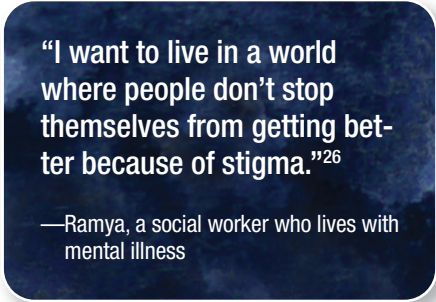
shame to a family. These cultural beliefs can make it difficult for people to talk about their mental health and ask for help.

Ramya is part of a South Asian culture, which she admits prevented her from seeking help for mental health. Growing up, she often heard words like *weak* and *crazy* when people talked about others with mental health conditions. As a result, Ramya tried to dismiss her mental health symptoms, which proved to be damaging. “I didn’t get help or even acknowledge what was going on with me,”²⁴ she says.

Only when Ramya moved far away from her hometown could she get help. In a new place, she could talk about her mental health, feelings, and past traumas without the fear of someone she knew finding out. In talk therapy, Ramya learned strategies and coping mechanisms to deal with her mental health. Even more importantly, she no longer felt ashamed of her condition. “I could be the role model and the girl with a mental illness,” she says. “It wasn’t a reason to be made fun of or be told to ‘suck it up.’ I didn’t need to call myself names anymore. I felt for the first time that I was going to be okay.”²⁵

Today Ramya wishes she had ignored the stigma and gotten help for her mental health earlier. A graduate of Columbia University, she works as a social worker and advocates for mental health. “I want to live in a world where people don’t stop themselves from getting better because of stigma, and I will do everything I can to fight that for the people who come after me,”²⁶ she says.

A member of the Black community, Dominique has experienced the stigma of mental illness herself. Starting when she was twelve years old, she began experiencing anxiety. By her senior year of high school, Dominique had panic attacks daily. Even though her mental health significantly impacted her daily life, she did not tell anyone about her struggles. “In my community, we



“I want to live in a world where people don’t stop themselves from getting better because of stigma.”²⁶

—Ramya, a social worker who lives with mental illness

don't talk about mental illness. You suck it up and deal with it,"²⁷ she says. Dominique could no longer ignore her mental health in college and went to a doctor for help. She was diagnosed with anxiety and depression and began treatment. Dominique hopes others will learn from her experiences. She wants people in the Black community to speak up about mental health and realize that it is okay to ask for help. "The hardest part of fixing a problem is acknowledging its existence. We have to stop making it seem like it's not okay to not be okay," she says. Ignoring mental health will only make things worse, she insists. "Not only does it invalidate the reality of these issues within our community, but it also reinforces unhealthy coping mechanisms."²⁸

Reducing the Stigma of Mental Illness

The stigma of mental illness is often rooted in fear of the unknown. Research shows that when people know someone with mental illness, they are more likely to understand mental health. Knowing someone dealing with mental health problems can make it less scary and more real.

When people with mental illness speak out and share their stories, it puts a human face on the illness and can help reduce stigma. For young people in particular, learning about others' mental health struggles can make these conditions less scary and encourage these youths to seek help for their problems. Often, young people turn to the internet to learn about mental health and connect with

others' personal stories. In 2020 a survey of fourteen- to twenty-two-year-olds in the United States found that 90 percent of teens and young adults who experienced depression symptoms turned to online sources to research mental health issues. Also, 75 percent used the internet to access personal mental health stories via blogs, podcasts, and online videos.

"The hardest part of fixing a problem is acknowledging its existence. We have to stop making it seem like it's not okay to not be okay."²⁸

—Dominique, a woman with anxiety and depression

Stigma in the Workplace

Mental health stigma remains a significant issue at work. While many employers offer employee assistance programs that provide mental health services, employees are often reluctant to take advantage of these programs because of stigma. In a 2019 nationwide poll from the American Psychiatric Association, about 50 percent of employees responded that they were concerned about talking about mental health at work. More than one in three said they worried about retaliation or being fired if they sought mental health treatment. However, there may be some hope that attitudes are changing. The poll found that younger workers were almost twice as likely as older workers to be comfortable talking about their mental health at work.

Many celebrities have also talked publicly about their mental health challenges. Celebrities such as Demi Lovato, Michael Phelps, Lady Gaga, and Dwayne Johnson have shared their mental health stories with the world. By being open about their mental health, they have helped make it easier to talk about and reduce the stigma surrounding mental health.

Singer and actress Demi Lovato has been very open about mental health struggles. The singer was diagnosed with bipolar disorder in 2010 after a lifelong battle with mental illness. Since entering treatment, Lovato has become an advocate for people to come out about their mental health. “Like millions of Americans, I am living with mental illness,” Lovato said before a performance in 2016. “But I am lucky. I had the resources and support to get treatment at a top facility. Unfortunately, too many Americans from all walks of life don’t get help, whether they fear the stigma or cannot afford treatment.”²⁹

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GETTING HELP AND INFORMATION

American Psychiatric Association

www.psychiatry.org

The American Psychiatric Association is an organization of member physicians working together to ensure humane care and effective treatment for all persons with mental disorders. Its website includes a special section on mental health resources for families.

American Psychological Association

www.apa.org

The American Psychological Association represents American psychologists who study and treat human behavior. The association's website features information and resources for psychologists, health care workers, and the general public about various mental health topics.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

www.cdc.gov

The CDC is the premier public health agency in the United States. Its website includes the latest information about mental health disorders, treatment, and research.

Mental Health America

www.mhanational.org

Mental Health America is an advocacy group for people with mental illnesses and their families. Its website features many resources, including an interactive tool to assist in finding mental health help, information on support groups, and mental health screening tools.

National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)

www.nami.org

The NAMI is an advocacy group for people with mental illnesses and has local chapters across the country. Its website offers a variety of resources, including information about mental health conditions, support groups, help lines, and more.

FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

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