

Mental Illness As Seen From The Inside

BY CHANDRA E. WOOLSON
JENNIFER K. O'BOYLE

When we were invited to participate in this series of articles, we were eager to have the opportunity to express our candid views on mental illness and recovery. We both cope with these issues daily and hope that sharing our perspectives can broaden the views of others.

My name is Chandra Woolson, and I have schizoaffective disorder bipolar type. I have a mental illness. I am not my mental illness. If I don't tell someone there is little outward evidence to show that I have difficulty. I have a college education, and at one time had a solid work history. I have a close, supportive family, a few select friends, and I can, when necessary, interact with strangers and acquaintances. All these people and aspects in my life define how others see me but who am I really? Am I the confident, well-read, articulate, loving person others often see? Or am I the pitiful, sick, broken person that others envision when they know I have a mental illness? Or, perhaps, I appear dangerous, my mental illness contagious?

These are all attitudes I have had to cope with in the last dozen years since I had my first hospitalization. Some people are more obvious than others, but those three types of reactions are typical.

Mental illness is not contagious, but the rest of the qualities I have described are all valid. I may be healthy and confident at this moment and next week I may be sick and broken. I prefer healthy. How do I prolong the good days? For me, the key to achieving that goal is to work on my recovery with the concept in my head that my recovery must contain all the aspects of



my life. It is not just about proper psychiatric medication. It depends on having a place to live, food to eat, people with whom I can socially connect, and the intellectual stimulation and spiritual awareness which keep me stable. All these pieces make up who I am as a whole person.

There are many components to holistic recovery, one of the most important being socialization.

My name is Jennifer O'Boyle, and I am a blessed person. I am loved by family and sweet friends. I am a member of a strong treatment program and am consistently rewarded by my writing. But what if I wasn't allowed to participate in such pursuits? What if I staggered under the yoke of my diagnosis so greatly that the stigma of mental illness defined my life? I can only imagine the pain and gut wrenching loneliness of such an existence, but sadly it is a reality for many people with a mental illness.

I'll admit, I've had brushes with this isolationist ideal when I was first diagnosed bipolar more than 10 years ago. My instinct was to run and hide from the world, this new horror of my mind too raw and shameful to share. And the world at large wasn't exactly welcoming to a girl who was tedious and so sick, it was a questionable chore to be around her. I was tiring and fragile, not exactly a great com-

bination for companionship. It is the nature of the mental illness beast to be isolating. The ill suffer from symptoms and hardships that make being alone seem like the best option. Depression cripples, leaving sufferers trapped in their beds with fatigue and despair. Schizophrenia lays delusional traps that make interpersonal interaction so difficult. And bipolar, yes my bipolar, is a swinging pendulum of mood from euphoria to blackest doubt, the cruelest of roller coaster rides dividing your psyche, making you a different person sometimes by the day or even hour.

So these illnesses, these disorders, these disabilities seem to cry out, "Leave me alone!" That certainly would be the most convenient solution. But to ignore these people, my people, me, is just issuing a sentence to them to suffer more harshly when they could be comforted, saved even. Companionship and personal validation is essential to recovery. For me, those days, weeks, months, where I was left to my own devices were the hardest and perhaps the most dangerous of my life. When I was alone, it was very easy for my head to overflow with thoughts of self-harm and death.

Thankfully, I came through the other side and live a relatively stable life now, but I didn't do it alone. If it weren't for the hands that reached out, the embraces finally offered, the ears listening, I wouldn't be alive. And that is why programs like Compeer are so important. By offering a support system to those that need it most, it doesn't just provide friendship to lonely individuals, it saves lives.

Chandra E. Woolson and Jennifer K. O'Boyle are the authors of "A Divine Journey: From Madness to Nonsense" and are residents of Chautauqua County.