

Mental Illness: There's Still Stigma

[Another Way](#) for the week of November 4, 2005

By Melody Davis

Earlier this year, a lot of people were surprised when a company came out with a new stuffed animal for Valentine's Day. It was a bear clothed in a stereotypical psychiatric straightjacket with the name "Crazy For You." It even came with "Commitment Papers."

Someone should have known better. It was immediately protested and shortly removed from the market. However, during the recent Halloween season, I'm sure many "haunted houses" featured "insane asylums" without most participants giving it a second thought.

Most cases of stigma regarding mental illness are not quite so overt. During this past year, the organization I work for has again been involved producing a major documentary for television, *Shadow Voices: Finding Hope in Mental Illness* for ABC-TV. It will begin airing Dec. 4 at the discretion of local stations and continue through Jan. 4 (check for local listings at <http://www.shadowvoices.com>).

Mental illnesses are the leading cause of suicide and also a major cause of worker disability. They affect upwards of 44 million people a year according to the National Institute for Mental Health. On a personal level, about one in three of us will suffer a major brain disorder sometime during our life. For these reasons alone, society should be concerned and work toward research, cures, and equal insurance coverage.

But it gets worse. People are often still ashamed or fearful to reveal they have a mental illness—even though doctors, scientists and researchers have learned in recent years that many of the illnesses of the brain do have a biological or neuro-chemical basis. Some religious groups think that mental illness must be the result of a failing or a sin. Some think that if you pray hard enough or "give it to God" you will be cured. While many insurance companies now offer some coverage for treatment for psychiatric illnesses, there are usually lower limits or higher co-pays for treatment than for treating physical illness. Therefore many don't seek or get treatment for problems that could be managed with medication and therapy.

Also, there is no single "mental health" system—but a confusing tangle of local, state, national, public and private agencies and programs to help. And while the move to deinstitutionalize many of the mentally ill from state hospitals during the 1970s was basically a positive move (the hospitals had many problems), the result was that there are more untreated mentally ill who are now on the streets. Many homeless persons

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have one or more mental illnesses, sometimes resulting in being jailed for loitering and vagrancy. Many experts say that today our jails are the default mental institutions-and the vast majority of such inmates are not violent. One huge prison until recently was releasing persons with mental illness at 2 a.m. in the middle of New York City with only two subway tokens and no medications or follow up appointments.

Back to the "crazy bear" and our use of language about mental illnesses. An advocacy organization, National Alliance for Mental Illness (NAMI) serves as a watchdog for occurrences of damaging stereotypes in the media (see www.nami.org under "Take Action" and "Fight Stigma" for other recent examples.) But it can be our casual, everyday use of language that can be most hurtful and damaging to persons around us with mental illness.

Risdon Slate, one of the men in the documentary who has bipolar disorder, is very open about his illness. His wife, Claudia, unintentionally said something that was insensitive right after she first met him. He was "acting silly," and she said something like, "Have you had your meds today?" Risdon said to her carefully, "I really don't appreciate that." Claudia says now, "Others might feel okay joking about that issue, but when his friends have said similar things, he usually calls them on it and does a little mini-education that meds for someone with an illness are not a joking matter." She acknowledged that sometimes people are joking just to show that they are accepting of the person's illness, that it isn't a big deal to them. "But some people lightly use the word 'crazy,' or 'you're acting really manic' [and shouldn't]. The words that we use are important."

One person we wanted to interview for the documentary eventually declined to be interviewed at his parent's insistence. Others would have been willing to tell their stories if their faces were in shadows. What other illness today (maybe AIDS) do people feel they have to hide? We have a long way to go to conquer the ingrown stigma surrounding mental illness.

Rosalynn Carter, the former U.S. First Lady who has worked as a mental health advocate for The Carter Center in Atlanta and earlier while her husband served as governor and President, says, "If insurance covered mental illness, the stigma would go away almost immediately. It would legitimize mental illnesses."

We have a long way to go in fighting stigma, but as you'll see in future columns in this series, the best "fighters" are the persons with mental illness themselves as they rebuild their lives, find jobs, and hope.