The Importance of Normalizing Mental Illness

by FLISS BAKER

‘I’m Not Well and That’s OK’

I think it’s safe to say that anyone with a mental health problem has said, “I just want to be normal.” I know I have.

I’ve sat back in the depths of depression and watched people rush around making cups of tea, preparing meals, getting showered and ready for work and reeling off the list of things they should have done yesterday. Although it is evident they have busy and stressful lives, there is always a part of me slightly jealous of their ability to cope and push through it all. I always wonder how they can complete even the smallest of tasks that my body has seemingly forgotten to do.

What Is Normal?

Everyone in this world is unique and different, so how can we benchmark ourselves against each other? We look different, wear different things, think differently, feel differently, enjoy different things… the list goes on and on. Not even identical twins have the exact same mental and physical capabilities!

I believe there are two perspectives on the issue of normalizing mental health. Bipolar, along with mental illnesses in general, can make us feel different. We all report feeling alone, insecure and out of reach. It is therefore natural for us to group everyone around us as a whole and label them ‘normal’ and us ‘different.’ In fact, these feelings make up symptoms of our illness.

At the same time, there is an ongoing shift in society’s attitudes to understand and accept mental illness. The aim is to ‘normalize’ mental health issues and open up discussion about a historically taboo subject.

In order to ‘normalize’ mental health, society needs to work together to remove the ‘them’ and ‘us’ labelling and break down any divides based on our perceptions of what is ‘normal.’

We need to challenge our own ideals. ‘Normal’ is not all about doing a nine-to-five job, supporting children and paying a mortgage with a forever-growing savings fund. ‘Normal’ could be travelling the world or volunteering for disaster charities. ‘Normal’ doesn’t mean wearing current fashion trends; it could be about wearing clothes associated with the opposite sex or wearing bold makeup because you like the colouring.

‘Normal’ reflects what our personal values and beliefs are and how we choose to express ourselves. Your normal is not mine, but who are we to judge? Breaking down the barriers of what ‘normality’ is would positively affect those struggling with mental ill health who feel different. It would help to prevent guilt and isolation from comparing themselves to everyone around, seemingly able to cope with life. Society needs to encourage this thought:

“I don’t feel stereotypically ‘normal,’ but I’m not well and that’s OK.”

Next page: feeling like a failure and what was normal to me.

Feeling Like a Failure

I can remember looking around at my family and friends and listening to their conversations, feeling oh so far away. They were discussing their upcoming holidays, long term relationships, successful careers and recent purchases, and I wanted the ground to open up and swallow me.

I felt embarrassed to be medically retired from my job at the age of 26, forced to move back into my parents' house. I earned pittance and I was a complete failure. I felt so far from 'normal' that I felt sick to my stomach.

I discussed this with my therapist and had to write down all the things I had accomplished and was proud of. In black and white I could see that my life had taken an unforeseen turn but I had achieved so much in a different way; using all my knowledge and skills to help and inspire others with mental health issues.

Mental ill health is very 'normal' and very common. We know that one in four of us experience mental ill health at some point in our lives. However, these figures are based on reported cases. How many more of us struggle without asking for help? Maybe the number is actually closer to two or three out of four of us?

If we consider the statistics and how common mental illness is, imagine if we all opened up to each other about how we felt? Most of us could relate, understand and be able to help and support!

Common Doesn't Make It Easy

Mental ill health should be accepted in society but in my opinion, it will never feel acceptable to those struggling. I have cried endless times for myself and others, feeling heartbroken. I recently spent time in hospital with strong women who have survived bereavement, rape, sexual and domestic abuse and marriage breakups, battling depression, suicide, bipolar, schizophrenia and psychosis — and my heart says this will never be 'acceptable.'

Life is too hard at times to say, 'It's ok,' and this should be acknowledged in order to aid recovery. We must remember that mental health diagnoses are as a result of an inability to cope with day-to-day life.

What Was Normal to Me?

Seven years ago I knew nothing about mental health and I considered myself to be an open, honest girl who enjoyed learning about people and life. But I look back and realize I had rigid views, categorising people as either 'strong' or 'weak' minded. I simply hadn't experienced mental ill health and therefore understood nothing.

Once, I ridiculed a colleague absent from work with depression, and I remember feeling irritated by my increased workload. I had discussions with other colleagues with the attitude that 'If we can do it, so can she.' I had absolutely no idea of the severity and depth of her illness and how debilitating it was, affecting her entire life.

Years later in the lead up to my diagnosis of bipolar, every cell in my body was fighting the overwhelming sadness and urge to end everything. I remember at that point piling guilt upon myself — I never dreamt the word 'depression' was responsible for this horrific, heart-rending experience that came with no immediate warning sign and robbed you of your daily life. I contacted the same lady on Facebook years later and apologized. I felt truly awful for my lack of understanding and I think an element of that guilt with stay with me forever.

When you sit behind a fence in a psychiatric hospital, in a small concrete garden, you realise that most people on the other side know nothing about what really goes on. The world is protected from the devastating effects of mental illness and our confusion, outbursts, loneliness and desperation.

Next page: so what can we do to normalize mental illness.

What Was Normal to Me?

Although there is a lot of media coverage, which is positive, much of it is written by journalists who are not mental health specialists. Their limited knowledge does not always present balanced views and more often than not, they use negative language.

So What Can We Do to 'Normalize' Mental Illness?

- Let’s read up on our illnesses and educate ourselves.
- Let’s get tough with media guidelines.
- Let’s connect with people and form a community as one — with the consistent message, ‘You are not alone.’
- Let’s make help more accessible. For example, it should be mandatory for doctors to provide basic information on self-help, helplines and specialist support websites in addition to any necessary referrals.
- Let’s refresh mental health training in professional environments to ‘humanize’ workers to remind themselves at all times ‘How would you feel if it was you?’
- Let’s introduce more guest speaking and lectures at schools, colleges and universities. Let’s make mental health learning mandatory.
- Let’s be aware of our personal qualities and build upon them to become better people — more patient and understanding with less judgement towards others.
- Let’s take action but remind ourselves that we won’t always be equipped to help someone but we can signpost someone to their doctors or support them in finding out what local help is available for them.
- Let’s be fearless about confronting difficult subjects. It is proven exposure to things de-sensitise us and enables us to cope. (I think this is particularly important with subjects including suicide and self-harm). Face up and lose fear!

I accept this is ‘blue sky’ thinking — but it’s a start.

Changing Attitudes

‘Normalizing’ mental health concerns is about changing societal attitudes, which will only come about through continual support of the media, educational establishments, governments, health care and businesses in pioneering and positive ways.

We need to integrate as one community to ensure everybody understands mental health and its subject area is transparent. We need to speak up, listen and take action to help each other because at the end of the day mental ill health is ‘normal’ in society today.

To me, it is more ‘abnormal’ to find those that still ridicule, lack patience and judge, and who are clearly in dire need of better education. We all have mental health and it’s common for people become poorly. Let’s join together to accept the reality in which we live so everyone can be treated to feel as ‘normal’ in their lives as possible.

Support Resources

- The Samaritans – UK helpline number
- Mind.org — excellent UK resource for all mental health issues with help resources
- MentalHealth.org.uk
- Rethink.org — Carers' guide for those supporting people with mental health problems
- Mind.org (Violence and Mental Health Factsheet)
- 1-800-334-HELP – 24-hour crisis hotline in the U.S.A.
- 1-800-273-TALK – 24-hour crisis hotline in the U.S.A.
- Fliss Baker Talks - My blog