Breaking Through Bipolar Stigma With the Words We Use

by SHARON DAVIS

Overcoming Hurtful Words and Bipolar Stigma

Crazy, whacko, weird, basket case, freak — we have all heard these derogatory terms, usually in reference to someone with a mental disorder. The words carry a hidden message, a warning that this person should be avoided at all costs.

The words are devoid of compassion — they teach people to not sympathize with the mentally ill, but to run as far away as possible. Once there is sufficient distance, they are taught that it is okay to make fun of us.

Through these mean words, we are put into a box labeled as damaged goods.

What Is Stigma?

Stigma is defined as a mark of disgrace that sets a person apart. When a person is labeled by their illness they are seen as part of a stereotyped group.

Negative attitudes create prejudice, which leads to negative actions and discrimination. The language people use to describe mental illness and treatment is a manifestation of stigma.

Millions of people are afflicted with a variety of chronic diseases, but few chronic diseases come with a deeply rooted stigma as we see with mental illness. This causes the mentally ill to fight their disease on two fronts: they must overcome both their disorder and the stigma attached with it, including the derogatory language.

Why These Words Hurt

Why do these childish expressions hurt so much? It is not the words themselves, but what they represent.

They paint the mentally ill as an outcast, unworthy of participating in “normal life.” While this isn’t true, it can be devastating.

These words and phrases can make people feel like they do not belong and are unwelcome. This can be damaging, especially because belonging and feeling accepted is so central to our recovery.

Even if we are not the direct recipients of these words, just hearing someone use them can be difficult. If we internalize these words and believe we are “crazy” or a “weirdo” we may think we are doomed to this description with little hope of getting better.

Once these hurtful words get in our head, we can become stuck in the negativity and turn ourselves into victims, rather than people who are fighting our illness.

Clinical Terms, Altered Meanings

In addition to the use of derogatory terms, there is also a trend toward using clinical terms with altered meanings. Right now it is very popular to use the term bipolar to describe someone who changes their mind often — this is insulting in a different way.

Expressions like this take a real disease, a disease we fight every day, and turn it into a descriptor for indecisiveness or some other everyday behavior. It may not be hurtful, but it casually dilutes our illness into something that is not serious nor needs treatment.

Ignorance Is at the Core

These words also reveal ignorance about mental illness. They are often thrown around as if a mental illness diagnosis were some sort of irreversible curse.

In addition, many people view mental illness as if it were contagious and worry about their own reputation. This kind of attitude prevents people from learning about mental disorders — that like other medical conditions they are treatable.

This also results in a lack of empathy, not realizing that people did not choose these disorders and the erratic mood swings. Finally, this attitude leads to a lack the desire to try to help, not realizing something a small as a smile or kind greeting could be a huge gift in the life of someone who is suffering.

This kind of ignorance is rampant and unfortunately only perpetuates the whole stigma crisis.

How to Make a Difference and Break Through Bipolar Stigma

In the 12 years of dealing with my illness, I've come to consider myself an ambassador for bipolar disorder and mental illness as a whole. I want to raise the level of education and awareness among those in my sphere of influence.

I am motivated because mental illness is common — approximately one in every five youth and adults will be afflicted in some manner. Add to that the millions of family and friends who are indirectly affected by the illness, and you have a large portion of our population that needs to move beyond the derogatory remarks and stigma.

You can make a difference by volunteering with a mental health organization in your community and join them in the ongoing fight against bipolar stigma. You can use social media or a blog to educate and inform others about the realities of mental illness, replacing the derogatory words with a new vocabulary that is both accurate and compassionate.

And most of all, when those awkward conversations come up where someone is using derogatory language, don't be afraid to speak up and question their choice of words. Don't be afraid to point out that mental illness is real and those who suffer need help and not hurtful comments. Don't be afraid to change the conversation.