



AGING TODAY

This is Mental Illness



By Bob Roth, Managing Partner of Cypress HomeCare Solutions

TBT (Turn Back Time) to the days of three television networks with far fewer choices and infinite less confusion over what to watch when you just wanted to zone out. On most given days, the amount of time I channel surf is about equal to the time I actually view anything. Longing for the good old days of LA Law and Seinfeld, I discovered NBC's top rated hit of the past two years. This is Us has been a stand out television series that portrays a family (the Pearsons) whose characters suffer with various behavioral health challenges.

The characters are flawed, but lovable nonetheless. The writers have addressed Randall's panic disorder and anxiety, Kate's overeating addiction, and Kevin, Jack, and William's substance abuse. The show is a case study in the stigma of mental health that is seen through the lens of society as scripted by the writers.

As a viewer do you scream at Kevin to snap out of it? Do you think Randall is faking it? Did these characters do something wrong to cause these circumstances? The lesson this show teaches is that people with mental illness need our love and support and don't deserve our judgment.

There are so many misconceptions about what mental illness is and what it means to live with a mental health condition. For example, mental illness is not the result of personal weakness, poor upbringing, or lack of character. Likewise, it isn't about "getting over it" through willpower. Without meaning to, we may send those stigmatizing messages to someone struggling with a condition.

Stigma is a big problem for people with mental health conditions. It affects people's well-being and damages their self-esteem and often prevents them from seeking treatment.

Dr. Jeffrey Lieberman, Professor and Chair of Psychiatry at Columbia University and past President of the American Psychiatric Association, offers an excellent analogy. If we thought of mental illness as we do heart disease, symptoms like depression would be compared to chest pain. Anxiety would be like shortness of breath. Psychosis would be like an arrhythmia. In other words mental illness would be seen correctly, as an organic illness which originates in the structures of the brain.

The truth is words really matter. Think about the words that are commonly used to describe people with mental health disorders such as deranged or psychotic. Compare that to the image of the warrior for someone who is fighting cancer.

Being respectful includes not using mental illness terms when not appropriate. How often have you heard, "I am so OCD, I am addicted to; or I am paranoid. These are real disorders that cause suffering to millions and are tossed around in our vernacular casually and with little regard for those who suffer usually in shame and in silence.

As our population ages at unprecedented rates, chronic illness, isolation, and bereavement lead to behavioral health changes and challenges. Our aging seniors of the "greatest generation" are not used to asking for help and talking about their problems. Offer support if you think someone is having trouble. Challenge misconceptions when you see or hear them.

As art imitates life, we have a bird's eye view of the very real mental health illnesses woven into the fabric of the Pearson Family. We the viewers helplessly fall in love with the characters as we peel back their layers without casting judgment or assigning stigma. With love and deep understanding, life can imitate art, and we can work to de-stigmatize mental illness by really seeing the person and not the condition.



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