

Mental illness nothing to sneeze at

It's time for society to drop the stigma it attaches to such conditions



AMANDA
TERMEER

A long time ago, I used to be normal. Then one day I woke up and everything had changed. Suddenly the world became two-dimensional: reality was falsified by the flatness of the earth. I could hear voices telling me that the mall people (a type of alien hiding in the dark corners of HUB Mall) were after me. My moods were totally random: gleeful one moment, and suicidal the next.

I'm now aware that I have an illness, and it's quite manageable with the right kinds of medication: antidepressants, anti-psychotics, mood stabilizers. But at the time, I had no idea what was going on. I felt like a pubescent girl getting her first period after never having an explanation of human biology. I didn't realize I was sick—I just thought that the world had gone crazy.

However, many people are still in the mental illness closet, afraid to step forward and make a stand. Some refuse to acknowledge their illness, even though 20 per cent of Canadians will experience mental illness in their lifetime. Staying in the dark, away from treatments, and the public is dangerous. Some studies estimate that fully 90 per cent of suicides are caused by a diagnosable psychiatric illness.

Most serious illnesses are taken

seriously. People with a mental illness, however, are often ignored or frowned upon. When a scraggly looking woman talking about the apocalypse and rambling about voices in her head walks by, people point and laugh, avoiding eye contact. When a man falls and has a heart attack, people rush to rescue him, completely ignoring the mentally ill homeless woman.

A physical illness is more tangible for the average person. But we students aren't just average—we're university-educated. Instead of joining in the masses are boycotting the mentally ill,

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we should start paying attention and try to truly understand the brain.

Mental illness is just that—an illness. To manage an illness, medication is necessary. Many people aren't aware of it, but taking medication has many side effects. For some patients, monthly or even weekly blood checks are necessary. Medications can cause weight gain, lowered white blood cells, acne, even diabetes. Those who take medications are putting themselves at risk, all for the sake of seeming less "crazy."

The stigma and labelling that comes with mental illness is also unfair. When someone has cancer, we say, "Jane has cancer." When someone has

schizophrenia or any other serious mental illness, we say "Jane is schizophrenic"—that is, they become the diagnosis. But no one would ever say, "Jane is cancerous."

People are afraid of embracing their disorder and treating themselves like a survivor. Most mental illness survivors hide in the darkness, knowing that their dirty little secret will cause friends, and sometimes even family, to avoid them. Another problem with mental illness is that it never fully goes away. People can struggle with neurosis and psychosis for their entire lives. No set of medication can ever make the illness go away.

Hollywood also has a unique portrayal of the "insane": brilliant minds crippled by schizophrenia (*A Beautiful Mind*); troubled writers (*Girl, Interrupted*), playful minds destroyed by institutionalization (*One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*).

Mentally ill people are also often sensationalized as murderers and psychopaths as well. It's been estimated that of all violence depicted on television, 70 per cent is caused by someone who is mentally ill. Overall, the stigma is usually either a troubled genius, or a destructive psychopath, but neither is accurate or fair.

Of course, life never is fair. As the great American beat poet Alan Ginsberg famously put it, "I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness starving hysterical naked, dragging themselves through the negro streets and dawn looking for an angry fix." So I'm going to take a step forward, and I urge others to join in our howl: I am a mental illness survivor!

Fines for Food a fine idea



MARIA
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time. It's brilliant: never before has my laziness been thus rewarded—never before have I actually been able to benefit a cause by procrastinating.

Unfortunately, I only have two soon-to-be-overdue books. Had I thought this out better and taken out more books sooner, the resulting late fees would have been even bigger (and my grades probably would have gone up a notch or two as well). If students' grades on papers can be positively correlated with the number of books that they borrow, then the amount the Campus Food Bank can get from a student might be calculated in this way: "grade received" times "number of days books were overdue" times "daily fine per book." According to this logic, if you get good grades and you procrastinate, you'll be helping the Campus Food Bank! It's a win-win situation all around.

According to its website, the Campus Food Bank was able to provide food for over 2300 individuals last year. I think we're very fortunate to have such a service to help students in need, and we're equally lucky to have generous sponsors and individuals who donate money, food and/or time to this organization. Therefore it's important that the Campus Food Bank continues to receive support through campaigns like Fines for Food—after all, both tuition and the cost of living are going nowhere but up.

So now I appeal to you, dear library users: if you're able, please join me in intentionally incurring some late charges on those pesky library books that you've been meaning to return. The more we procrastinate, the more we can help make this campus a better place for all—as long as we do it by 4 March.

I'm lazy and I procrastinate; I admit it. Before Reading Week, I stayed up until 2am writing a paper; now that I've handed it in, I'm still procrastinating. The books that I borrowed for my research are still sitting on my floor, and I've taken no initiative to return them. The cold weather we had before Reading Week also did nothing to get me off my ass and return those books.

And then I saw it, like a beacon of light in a stormy harbour (on the U of A Library's main page, to be exact): an advertisement for Fines for Food. Far from being some sort of punitive consumption tax, this promotion means that between 26 February and 4 March, the U of A Libraries will donate all the fines collected from overdue books to the Campus Food Bank.

Now, I'm not good at math by any stretch of the imagination, but here's the way I figure it: my books will be overdue soon, and then I'll incur a fine. The longer I take to return those books, the greater my fine will be. Therefore the more I procrastinate in returning my books this week, the more I'll be helping out the Campus Food Bank.

I can usually come up with pretty creative ways to justify my laziness, but this is just too perfect. And since Fines for Food is one of the largest fundraisers for the Campus Food Bank, I would actually be doing my fellow students a disservice by returning my books on

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