

An illness that should not be hidden

Maria Katsonis

The statistics are well known — one in five people will experience depression in their lifetime. I had paid scant attention to this fact until I became one of the one in five and experienced a crippling episode of depression. Suddenly the statistics became more than numbers on a page.

It hits me like a sledgehammer. One day, I am able, light of heart and outgoing. The next I am tipped into a pool of blackness that robs me of life. Joy is replaced by futility, optimism by hopelessness, pleasure by despair. Sleep becomes non-existent. The hours to dawn drag slowly, filled with anguish and torment. Yet when the sun rises, I am immobilised, unable to get out of bed. I force myself to get up, to put one foot in front of the other to make it through another day.

For four months, I struggle to cope with everyday life. I don't understand what is happening to me, I don't recognise the signs of depression. When I do, I am too ashamed to seek help, believing I can overcome this by sheer will. But all I do is sink deeper into the blackness until I can no longer manage. By the time I see a doctor, I am unable to read a newspaper or pay a bill. Fortunately, I find an understanding GP who immediately recognises the severity of my depression. I am in hospital within 24 hours.

In hospital, I begin the process of recovery. People have asked me what it's like being a patient in a psychiatric hospital. To paraphrase Charles Dickens, it was the worst of times and the best of times. You get used to the nurses checking on your mood three or four times a day and asking if you feel like harming yourself. You get used to the night nurse shining a torch in your face every hour when you are asleep to make sure that you are still there. You get so used to the subdued hospital environment that when you are taken to a local cafe on accompanied leave, you are overwhelmed by the people and the noise.

During those dark periods in hospital, I am sustained by the unswerving faith of those close to me that I will recover. They maintain their faith even when I give up on myself. Yet amid the darkness, there is also light. There is camaraderie with other patients; my 12-year-old nephew visits and we spend quiet afternoons figuring out word puzzles together.

After five weeks, I am well enough to leave hospital but I need more time to readjust to life and living. I stay with my aunt and uncle who also have their daughter and two-year-old granddaughter staying with them. It is a Greek version of Packed to the Rafters and I spend my days with the two-year-old, reading stories, assembling jigsaw puzzles and learning to laugh again.

After nine weeks away from work, I face the dilemma of what to say on my return. Most colleagues thought I was on leave because of some unspecified medical condition. I decide it is important to give voice to my depression and not hide from it.

I talk openly about my depression with family, friends, colleagues and others. In nearly every instance, people share with me their own experience with mental illness or that of their parents, siblings, partners or children. One colleague tells me about his panic attacks every time he makes a presentation. Another tells me of her anxiety when her workload became so unmanageable, she was unable to breathe and feared her heart would explode. A friend tells me about his daughter with depression who had a psychotic episode and has to be involuntarily hospitalised. It is the one of the hardest decisions he has had to make as a parent.



I am struck by the invisibility and secrecy that cloaks this illness, which touches so many. In my case, I didn't find out about the three generations of depression in my family until the day I was hospitalised. This secrecy and silence all contribute to stigma. While organisations such as beyondblue and Sane Australia have done much to raise community awareness, the results from recent studies show further work is needed to remove the stigma of depression.

Beyondblue's National Depression Monitor surveys community awareness, understanding and attitudes about depression and other mental health disorders. In the 2007-08 survey, one in two people said those with depression were unreliable while one in three said that people with depression couldn't be trusted in positions of responsibility. In a 2008 research study from the Australian National University, one in five people said they wouldn't work with someone suffering depression.

Fortunately, stigma wasn't an issue with my employer as I had full support while I was ill. However, other people I met in hospital were not so lucky. They were battling discrimination in the workplace or, in some instances, unable to tell their employer for fear of being judged and potentially losing their jobs.

Broad community awareness campaigns can do much to address perceptions and understanding of depression. But stigma can also be addressed by small, individual acts such as having the courage to speak to a doctor, sharing an experience of depression with a friend, or listening with compassion if someone tells you about their own experience.

Whether you are one of the one in five who is struck with depression or one of the four in five who will never experience it, we can all help shed its stigma.

Maria Katsonis is a Victorian public servant at the State Services Authority.

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