



Mental Health and Stigma

The Basics of Mental Health

Stigma & My Life's Epiphany: A Short Play in Six Acts

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WHEN MOST PEOPLE hear the word “epiphany” they think the definition involves a “sudden awareness.” But my life’s epiphany actually came in six different steps.

As far back as I can remember, I had a sadness that I couldn’t explain, often wishing I was never born or not alive. I had a good childhood with great parents, so it was difficult for me to understand why I was so sad. I kept it to myself for most of my life.

In 1993, my younger brother, who was seventeen at the time, was killed in a car accident. This traumatic event took me to a whole new level of sadness and I went from

wishing I wasn't alive to contemplating suicide. When the thoughts of wanting to die got stronger than my desire to live, I sought help.

First, I talked to a pastor who could only muster the sentiment that he would pray for me. Next, I talked to a military chaplain. "Pull yourself together," he grunted. "There are people who have it a lot worse than you." I left that office feeling lower than I ever had in my life—and that weekend, I attempted suicide.

In the aftermath, I thanked God daily (and still do) that the attempt didn't work, but I was still very sad. Although I still struggled with suicidal thoughts, I knew I wouldn't attempt suicide again. However, I didn't know how to make the suicidal and depressive thoughts go away.

Epiphany: Act I

While in college, I took some psychology classes and began to learn about depression. I soon found out "*I'm not the only one who feels this way.*" Learning about others didn't take away my pain—I still didn't know what to do about it—but I thought I could learn to help others. I continued with college and eventually obtained my master's degree in Clinical Counseling. Soon, I began working with others who were depressed and felt hopeless.

Epiphany: Act II

I quickly realized that "*Helping others helped me feel better.*" However, I felt like a fraud. I encouraged others to openly discuss their mental illness with their loved ones and not be ashamed. Yet at the same time, I kept my own mental illness to myself and struggled in silence.

While working for a behavior health unit with acute mental health clients, I had a supervisor, Erin, who had lost her brother to suicide. I still struggled with depression, and I'd recently found out a friend had attempted suicide. I knew I had to do more to help myself and others.

Erin and I discussed the need to create better education and more awareness in our community, so we decided to organize a Suicide Prevention and Awareness Conference.

Epiphany: Act III

Putting on this conference helped me realize that "*Educating others about suicide helps me feel like I can make a difference.*" It felt good to help others—but I continued to live with stigma by keeping my battle with depression to myself.

By 2014, I had helped organize three suicide prevention and awareness conferences for the hospital where I worked. I'd spoken at two conferences about suicide prevention and I'd become a Mental Health First Aid instructor. I felt I was really starting to make a difference, in spite of my silence about my own depression.

In the fall of 2014, I was asked to speak about mental health and suicide prevention at the Cape Girardeau Out of the Darkness Walk. I agreed, but I struggled with what to present. Finally, I decided to share my personal story—but first, I needed to tell a few co-workers about my depression and suicide attempt, in private.

Epiphany: Act IV

“My friends and co-workers didn’t judge me; they supported me,” and some even shared with me their own personal struggles. I spoke with my adult children and my parents, and I explained what I was planning on sharing at the walk. Each member of my family was supportive.

The day came when I stood in front of more than three hundred people—friends, coworkers, and a lot of strangers—and shared my story.

Epiphany: Act V

Just after finishing my speech, I realized for the first time that *“I couldn’t truly be free until I accepted and talked about my own illness.”* I could never take back the words I'd said to that crowd of onlookers—and I was okay with it. And since then, I have continued to share my story and have found nothing but tremendous support.

Epiphany: Act VI

Recently, someone asked me if I was upset with the people who I had turned to for help, people like the pastor or the military chaplain, who didn't help me. It took me but a split second to reply. *“People can’t help if they aren’t educated and comfortable talking about mental illness and suicide.”*

And that's why I share my story: so that if you or someone you know needs help with their mental illness or is experiencing suicidal thinking—reaching out for and receiving help won't take an epiphany in six parts. It'll happen in a matter of seconds.

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Group Discussion/Self-Reflection Questions

- 1) How did stigma manifest itself, even from well-meaning people who wanted to help Rick?
- 2) How did stigma hurt Rick, even as he worked to help others going through similar experiences as him?
- 3) Like Rick, why don't many people talk about mental health?
- 4) What are some ways we can decrease the stigma around talking about and getting help with mental health: with ourselves? with our families? in our community?
- 5) If you saw a friend or classmate that you thought may need help, but who may be afraid to ask because of the stigma, what are some ways you may be able to provide some help?
- 6) How can we keep positive conversations around mental health going on a long term basis?