



## The Importance of Storytelling and Support Systems

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### No Shame on U

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Originally Published in

***The i'Mpossible Project:***

***Changing Minds, Breaking Stigma, Achieving the Impossible***

“I ONLY WANT TO talk to you when you’re happy. So, let’s not talk again for a while.”

These were the heartbreaking words I heard over the phone from one of my closest childhood friends. It didn’t help that she dropped this on me during my second hospitalization for one of the deepest, darkest periods of depression that I had ever faced. I had told very few people about my hospitalization, because there was such a stigma connected with it, as if I was “less than.” I already felt so alone and isolated. But having a close childhood friend make feel like an outcast just for having a brain disorder—her words took my misplaced shame and loneliness to a whole new level. I knew she would never have said those things to me if I’d been in the hospital because my leg was broken or because I needed heart surgery.

My hospital stay was significantly extended, in no small part because of that close childhood “friend”—who I never heard from again.

My first and second hospitalizations occurred when I was thirty and thirty-one years old. I was living in New York City at the time, a home away from home where I had attended both undergraduate and graduate school. After my second hospitalization, I decided to start fresh and move to LA—I love entertainment and pop culture, and I was excited at the prospect of working in casting for TV and film.

I soon found that, even though LA offered countless opportunities, without the right support and treatment, I was not going to get any better. Within a year, I was back in Chicago, living in my parents' house. I ended up being hospitalized once again.

I decided I couldn't live like this anymore. I searched for the right therapist and psychiatrist to get on the road to recovery, which I now took very seriously. I worked on my mental health almost religiously. I never missed a therapy session, and I always made sure to take my medication. Soon, I took a job in a law firm and was able to move out of my parents' house and live on my own again. I started dating a man who would soon become my husband.

But I still wasn't completely free. The chains of stigma wouldn't loosen their grip on me. I felt like I had to keep my mental health condition a huge secret from anyone who wasn't my husband or who hadn't known me at the time of my hospitalizations.

Fast-forward to almost a decade after meeting my husband. I won a charity auction and had the opportunity to go to lunch with the legendary actress Glenn Close. I knew that she was a huge mental health advocate, and I felt safe enough with her to tell her my entire story. She was the first person other than my husband who I was completely open with, and she was incredibly receptive and affected by my story in a positive way. I thought, if I can tell Glenn Close my story, I can tell anyone—and maybe prevent them from all the pain I suffered because of stigma.

I sought out a fellowship for social entrepreneurs, at the time called JCC Presentense, and created an organization: No Shame On U. Little by little, I began to tell people my story, but I didn't do anything in a big way until October of 2014 when I did a segment on the local news for National Depression Screening Day. That segment led to a cover story about No Shame On U in a local Chicago publication.

The reception I received from people after sharing my story was better than anything I could ever have imagined. It resonated with so many people that people were writing me and saying that because of me, they were able to seek help for depression—after weeks, months, and even decades of silence due to stigma.

Most importantly, the response showed that our community was really in need of an organization like No Shame On U, which is dedicated to eliminating the stigma associated with mental health conditions.

Soon enough, community members and volunteers were rallying around our efforts, helping us with community outreach programs and educational presentations on mental

health and stigma, as well as the creation of online tools and resources for mental health and so much more.

Research shows that stigma is one of the key barriers to people seeking mental health treatment. Studies also show that one of the best ways to break the stigma is for people to have contact with individuals living with a mental health condition—real, kind, compassionate people; people like me. After keeping it a secret for ten years, now I tell my story wherever they'll let me through the door: at synagogues, community mental health nights, speaker meetings, and forums, all in an effort to be part of the change to break stigma once and for all.

After hearing my story, this is an email I received from a family member of a person living with a mental health condition:

*“Hi Miriam, our family was so touched by your presentation and inspired by all of your efforts. Today was an important day for us. Because of you, we are comfortable moving forward to educate ourselves and become involved. Thank you.”*

If I had to go through everything I went through—the pain, the terrible stigma—just to help this one family, then it was all worth it.

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#### Group Discussion/Self-Reflection Questions

- Why do you think Miriam's former close childhood friend didn't want to talk to her while Miriam was being hospitalized for depression?
- How do you think Miriam would have been affected if her former close childhood friend was supportive and kind?
- How was Miriam affected by telling her story to the actress Glenn Close?
- Do you think it will be easier or more difficult (and why) for someone to get help overcoming a big obstacle after reading Miriam's story?
- How can you craft and create your story? *E.g. writing, dancing, poetry etc.*
- Where are some outlets where you can share your story?
- Who can and will benefit from your story?