

Opening my mind

I learned not to judge people who have been diagnosed with a mental illness

By **Melissa Nuñez**
16, Warren HS (Downey)

A few years ago I was at a friend's house with three other friends. While we were outside a neighbor of hers, a woman who looked like she was in her 40s, walked over and asked if we wanted to go to the carnival with her. I thought she was being friendly but my friend politely said "no thanks." I didn't make much of it until the neighbor left and my friend told us, "Don't talk to her, she's bipolar."

I had heard about bipolar disorder from TV and the news but I didn't really know what it was. We went back inside my friend's house and she told us that we should stay in there until her neighbor left. My friend made it seem like her neighbor was dangerous and I believed that we should stay away from her.

I never saw the lady again but when I got home I was so confused about what had happened that I decided to do my own research. I had always thought that people with a mental illness would be like what I'd seen on TV: moving their arms around, speaking quickly and loudly and talking to people who weren't there. But it seemed like there was nothing wrong with her.

I looked up "what does it mean if someone is diagnosed with bipolar disorder?" WebMD was the first site that popped up. I found out that bipolar disorder is "a mental disorder marked by alternating periods of elation and depression." It was the first time I had read in detail about a mental illness. Reading about the symptoms, like how they can go from being really depressed to really happy, I thought about how just meeting her for a few minutes it didn't even go through

my mind that she might have a mental illness. She seemed like just another neighbor to me. Maybe I had met someone with a mental illness before and I didn't know it.

I read that mental illness can be hereditary, which means it is genetically passed down by a parent. Or it can be caused by things like trauma as a child, a death, a dysfunctional family life, feelings of loneliness, low self-esteem or substance abuse. There have been some mental illnesses that have been linked to an imbalance of chemicals in the brain called neurotransmitters. These chemicals help nerve cells in the brain communicate. If they are not working well, messages may not go through correctly, which then leads to symptoms of mental illness. It's like when you're doing a group project and there's no communication between everyone and at the end the project is a mess. It made me realize that, like if someone gets cancer, it's not their fault.

There was a section that said people diagnosed with bipolar disorder can lead a normal life and another on how family or friends should support them. It said not to treat them differently. After reading all the medical facts about bipolar disorder I didn't think we needed to avoid her.

People with mental illness are going through a struggle and we shouldn't judge them because of that. I knew how they must be feeling. My brother died when I was 8 and there were times I felt sad. But it's not something they can get rid of as time passes by, like I did. It can be a longer struggle for them.

I didn't think about mental illness much until 10th grade, when I heard that Demi Lovato was getting treatment for cutting herself, eating disorders and depression. In later interviews she said that during her treatment she was diagnosed with bipolar disorder.

I was surprised because she seemed to have it all but she had been suffering from an eating disorder since

the age of 8 and had been cutting herself since she was 11. Demi had been in the spotlight from a young age and the pressure from that and being bullied about her weight in school affected her. She was one of my favorite singers so I decided to read more about eating disorders. I found out that someone with an eating disorder struggles to control their irrational thoughts, like in this case thinking that they're fat but they look skinny to everyone else or feeling guilty after they eat. The same can be true for other mental illnesses.

WE DON'T KNOW WHAT OTHERS ARE GOING THROUGH

One day in 11th grade I was talking with a classmate when Demi Lovato came up. He said that he didn't get how she could have gotten depressed just from the "stress" of touring. Right after he said that the bell rang so the conversation ended. When I thought about what he said, I realized he doesn't know all the facts. Mental illnesses don't happen overnight and someone could be rich and famous but that doesn't mean they're always happy. When I was depressed in middle school because I was grieving over my brother I didn't show it and I didn't talk to anyone about it except my parents.

The way we treat someone can have an impact on their life. A few months ago I was watching a TV series about an 8-year-old who was suffering from depression caused by bullying and his parents' marital problems. He tried to end his life but fortunately he just broke his arm. The show made me wonder if I have ever unintentionally said something that hurt someone. I've heard teens joking around saying "stop being so emo," but it could make the person feel bad if they're going through something.

You may know someone who is struggling with something but you don't know it because they're ashamed to talk about it. Tell your friends "if you ever need me, I'm here" so they realize they can talk to you. People diagnosed with mental illness are just people and should be treated like everyone else.

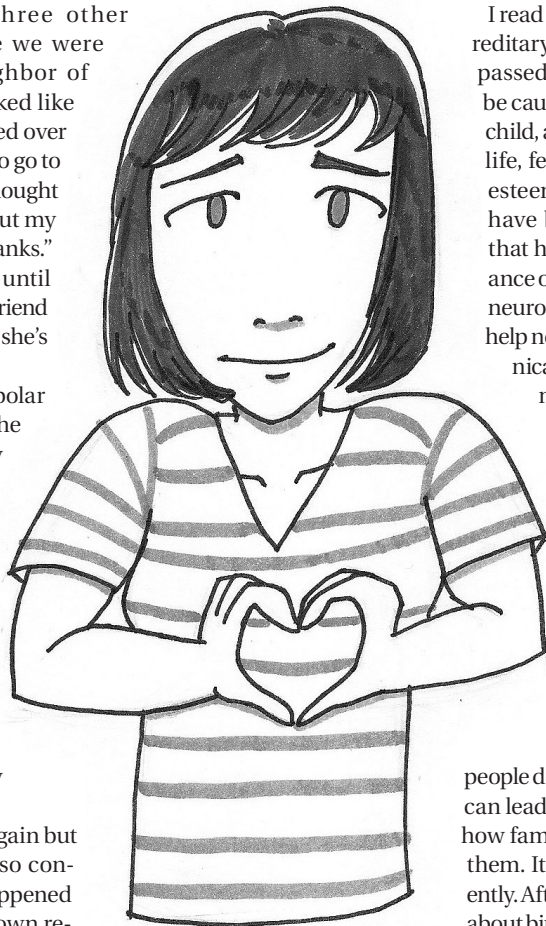


Illustration by Amy Fan,
18, Temple City HS



Melissa says not to make assumptions about people because you don't know everything about them.

Think before you speak

Phrases like “stop acting bipolar” and “you’re so OCD” are insensitive

By **Julia Waldow**

17, Beverly Hills HS

One day last year when I was walking out of the school bathroom, I didn’t touch the door handle. Instead, I opened the door with my elbow. A lot of people had been coming to school sick, and I didn’t want to get sick too. One of my friends commented, “Wow, do you have OCD? What are you doing?” I was surprised that my friend said something because I thought I was being smart. I felt she was implying that there was something wrong with me for being cautious. Trying to avoid getting sick and having OCD (obsessive-compulsive disorder) are not related. I told my friend, “Hey, that’s really not funny, and I find it kind of offensive when you say things like that.” She just said, “OK, OK,” and dropped the topic.

For a while, she stopped using the term “OCD” around me, but I still hear her use it to describe people who are upset that things aren’t in order or who are being very clean. I still hear other kids using the word “OCD” too. I also used to use mental illness words in a derogatory way, but my mom told me it was wrong. She

used to work in a psychiatric hospital and told me not to use mental illness terms to label others.

My mom said that some people have schizophrenia, which means that they have trouble telling what is real from what is unreal. A person with schizophrenia may see things that aren’t there. She said other people may have bipolar disorder, which is a condition that causes a person to experience shifts in mood and behavior—from mania or excessive activity to depression. She said, “Using these terms to talk negatively about people who have the diagnosis, or to poke fun at those who don’t have these illnesses, is not OK.”

I didn’t understand why it was such a big deal. Everyone did it! My mom was overreacting, I told myself. But just to make my mom happy, I tried listening to her.

It was difficult. In middle school one of my P.E. teachers made us run two miles and do a bunch of push-ups, sit-ups and stretches and we were really tired. I didn’t know why he was being so mean because he was usually a nice guy. I told my mom about my teacher when I got home from school and I said that he had been acting really bipolar. My mom said, “Don’t say that.” I said “OK” but it wasn’t sincere since I was still mad at him.

When people say things like “she’s so anorexic,” “he’s acting psychotic” or “stop acting bipolar,” they imply that it’s OK to treat people with these diagnoses badly.

My classmates say, “Wow, she’s so thin! She’s, like, anorexic.” If I know them I’ll say, “Well you don’t know that. Maybe they have a really fast metabolism.” In the moment they’ll say OK but they’ll say it again later. Anorexia is a legitimate medical condition that should be taken seriously.

Even teachers use these terms. In sixth grade, we were having a conversation about a character in a book. One of the characters washed his hands a lot, and one of the kids in my class said, “Wow, that’s weird. Did he have OCD?” My teacher laughed and said, “Maybe. Yeah, it is weird!” I was surprised that my teacher didn’t tell him

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MENTAL HEALTH Q&A

I interviewed an expert to learn about mental illness

L.A. Youth: What are some examples of mental illness?

Pia Escudero, director of Los Angeles Unified School District’s Mental Health Services:

Some of the examples that we see are depression, anxiety. We also have post-traumatic stress disorder and that’s evidenced by some of our students who see very traumatic events in the community or have frightening events happening to them. We have all sorts of more serious ones, like bipolar disorder and schizophrenia.

How common is mental illness among teens?

By the time a student is 16 years old, about 25 percent need mental health support. Some of them are fluid, which means they can get better if they get the right help. And some of them are debilitating where they can need more [comprehensive support services].

When you said debilitating, is that bipolar disorder or schizophrenia? Bipolar is treatable with medication and the right support and



so is schizophrenia. What happens as children and adults get older, they choose not to take medication and get the support they need ... Then you see the untreated symptoms.

What causes mental illness? Is there a genetic link? Does your home situation have an effect? Sometimes it’s both, it depends on the illness. We know that being exposed to traumatic events can lead to certain issues such as post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety. If you see a gunfight, you go home and you start having nightmares and can’t sleep well and then you go to school and can’t concentrate and then you hear the helicopter and that’s re-traumatic. Eventually you can have anxiety or you can be depressed.

The more people can ask questions: “So I’m feeling down, what counseling services are there?” the better it will be.

At what point should someone seek help?

At any time. If they have questions or they’ve had an incident or they have a question about a friend. I think seeking help should be part of everyday life. Find out if the nurse is available or a teacher. If they don’t have anybody at their school, there are hotlines, web-based support. [See Where to Turn on the next page for resources.]

What should I do if a friend says they have a mental illness? I think you need to listen carefully and try to see what that means, what kind of mental illness. And do things to protect her, which may mean getting her to the right help or telling her parents. Sometimes you don’t have the answers so ... find an adult, if it’s in the school, maybe in church, but connect her to someone and you can go with her.

What if your friend tells you to keep it a secret? You can say, “I’ll try to keep it a secret but if I need to get the right help because I can’t help you, I’m going to get it.” When you have a feeling that this person is at risk or that someone is going to get hurt by that person, you have a responsibility to try to prevent them [from doing something].

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—JESSICA MARIN, 18, CULVER CITY HS

WHERE TO TURN

If you are feeling depressed or having any kind of mental health problem and need someone to talk to, there is help. Counseling and other services are available. To find them:

Dial 2-1-1 to find social services in Los Angeles County, including counseling and mental health centers. Or search online at www.healthycity.org.

Call Teen Line at 1-800-TLC-TEEN (1-800-852-8336) to speak with a trained teen peer counselor from 6 to 10 p.m. or go to www.teenlineonline.org.

Call 1-877-7CRISIS (1-877-727-4747), an anonymous 24-hour suicide prevention hotline.

Call the California Youth Crisis Line at 1-800-843-5200 to get phone counseling, information and referrals. Or go to www.youthcrisisline.org to chat with counselors on Tuesdays from 4:30 to 10 p.m.

Call the Trevor Lifeline for gay and lesbian youth at 1-866-4U-TREVOR (1-866-488-7386) or go to www.thetrevorproject.org.

Go to the ReachOut forums, a website for people ages 14-25 to talk about what's on their mind, at www.ReachOutHere.com.

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that it's not OK to say that OCD is weird. Teachers are supposed to be role models.

I wanted to talk to someone who has a mental illness to see how they feel when they hear people use these terms. I called L.A. Youth writer Henry Studebaker, 16, who has been diagnosed with OCD.

He said that before he was diagnosed, he would laugh when he heard people say things like "that's so OCD." Once he was diagnosed, the jokes weren't that funny anymore and hearing them made him embarrassed. He didn't want to tell people that he had OCD because he didn't want to be picked on.

"When I was first diagnosed, I was shocked and a bit frightened and worried that I'd be different, that it was going to change me," he said.

'IT'S NOT A JOKE'

He said that he used to wash his hands all the time but now he's taking medication and he's better. He doesn't let the slurs bother him anymore but he thinks people shouldn't say them. "It could make someone feel depressed and that they're different and looked down upon. It's not something that they can control. It's not a joke."

Talking to Henry made me realize that one of your friends could have a mental illness and they've never told you because you've been using these terms.

I still sometimes slip up. If a teacher is giving us a

whole bunch of homework sometimes I'll say that he or she is crazy. People use this term so often that it's hard to not use it. I don't think that "crazy" is as offensive as the other slurs, but it's still not good to say.

When I was younger, my sister, my dad and I used to go downtown to visit museums. When we would walk from our car to the museum I'd see some people who were talking to themselves or screaming. It scared me. I thought they were going to come up to me and start yelling at me, so I'd walk on the other side of my dad. My dad would say, "It's OK, don't worry" but I'd still be scared. I thought that people with a mental illness were strange.

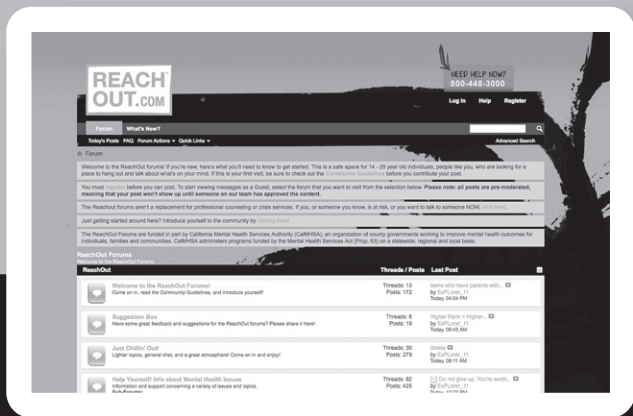
I'm much better now when I see people screaming on the street. I don't freak out and walk on the other side of the person I'm with. I've learned that we're both people and they deserve respect. We all have feelings, and no matter what kind of illness you have, when someone puts your condition down, it hurts.



Julia encourages people to say something when others use these slurs.

"My best friends from kindergarten decided to stop being friends with me..."

"I think I was depressed when I was younger without even realizing it, I wasn't one to flaunt it or anything like that. I never really looked bothered on the outside, nor did I have any expressive ways of letting it out..."



"I understand what you are going through..."

"I am not sure if I have an eating issue, but I do find myself eating excessively and desperately. I don't even realize it sometimes..."

Just a few of the conversations that you can join at www.ReachOutHere.com