



Coping with Depression

Depression: diagnosis and stigma

Commentary

Being given a mental health diagnosis, such as depression or anxiety, is experienced by people very differently, depending in part on whether it results in better access to treatment such as therapy, or being disempowered and marginalised.

Jim Brown

I more or less self-diagnosed ... And I went to see my GP, and I put it to him, and he said, 'Yeah, I think you're probably right, and we can make an appointment for you to go and receive the diagnosis formally.' And, it was a bit of a relief 'cause I thought well, yeah, okay, this is a bona fide illness, so it's not my fault. But, the more I thought about this, the more I really didn't like it. I was gonna have to go to see an expert who was gonna charge me £350 to tell me what I already knew, and give me a one-way ticket to disability. And, the more I thought about it, the more I didn't like it. And I thought there's got to be a better way. There must ... there must be a better way than this. And so I went back to my GP and I explained to him, yes, I had these highs and lows but I didn't really want to be a professional disabled person thanks very much. There's got to be a better way. There's always a temptation to go for a diagnosis, because that kind of lifts it off your shoulders and then the professional is responsible for it. But in doing so, you kind of give up your own responsibility for your own well-being.

Stephen Fry

I think it helps to have a diagnosis. I'm sure of it. Apart from anything else, it's ... it cuts off all kinds of other diagnosis – well, it's not this, it's not that, it's not that. And that can be good. Of course, like any diagnosis it could be that the one thing it is, is the worst thing it could be which I don't think it is in the case of um bipolar disorder. And not knowing whether what you have is, is actually classifiable and recognisable as a condition that is in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual and is, you know an 'official' thing that has its indicators and symptoms that are recognised. If you imagine how much of a relief of the mind it is when something physical is traced to the source, then imagine how much more so when it is something to do with your state of mind.

Trisha Goddard

I wouldn't have liked that label, I talk about, um, I have had depression or I live with depression, but I'd already been quite vocal about labels. I had a sister who had schizophrenia and I really despised people talking about schizophrenics or manic depressives or depressives, you know, because we don't talk about cancerous people, you know. And I think that if you label somebody enough – and I'd say that to everybody, anybody – if you label that person or that group of people enough, they take on a victimology, they see themselves as victims ... I prefer to think of myself as someone who happens to have depression as part of their make-up, but has learned coping mechanisms.

Commentary

One of the problems with diagnosis can be that it sometimes exacerbates the stigma experienced by people with mental health problems.

Trisha Goddard

And I wasn't surprised to find out when I was involved in the Community Attitudes and Awareness Programme, when we did a lot of research, we found one of the highest levels of stigma towards mental illness within the mental health profession. That's because it's like – I'm treating them, it's not me.

Stephen Fry

The real problem with it is other people. That's the bigger problem. All, all the seriousness that I've discussed of this condition is absolutely to be addressed and not to be taken lightly, but really, it is society and stigma that I think lie at the heart of, of the problem of mental health in this country and will continue to do so.

Trisha Goddard

And I think that's something that has to be watched very carefully because once someone's got this label of depression or anxiety or whatever, you've got to be very careful that you don't label everything they do in every reaction as a symptom of what you've labelled them.

I had a cab driver once who said, he'd gone to Hellesdon, which is a psychiatric hospital near Norwich, and had to pick somebody up. He said, 'Oh, you know', he was going on about how he wouldn't have one of 'them' from 'there' in his cab, 'because you don't know what they're going to do' and 'you just can't take your eyes off them'. And I just let him chat on and I said, 'So are they scary?' and "Oh, yes, yes, you can always tell when you've got one of them in the cab, you know, I always keep my eye in the mirror and what have you' and I said 'I expect you'll be keeping your eye on the mirror now, won't you?' and he said 'What do you mean?' and I said, 'Well, I've been in a psychiatric hospital. I spent five weeks' and he said, 'But you seem normal.' I said, 'What the hell is normal? Cycle on the washing machine.' That's my slogan, 'Normal is a cycle on a washing machine.'

Jim Brown

I think what would help is if people would just be prepared to discuss it more openly, particularly in a working environment, because work for me, the working environment is where the stress can be the worst. Because you're expected to perform. You're contracted to perform. You're there to earn money ... really, and your employer has a right to expect that you will deliver something. And if you start to lose confidence in yourself, then that can kind of be a self-fulfilling prophecy. So we need to find a way of talking about this and opening up the workplace, really, so that people can say, 'You know, I've experienced ... I've had these experiences which made it difficult for me to do my job, or whatever.' We need to find a way to make it ordinary.

Stephen Fry

It's much easier for me in my 'business' to say that I, I have this condition. No-one's going to sack me, no-one's going to think that I'm not up to the job. They may even think I'm better qualified for it in some strange way. You know, such is the obeisance that we pay to, to, to show business and the creative arts. But the people who work in teaching and spot-welding and factories and offices around the country, they're not in such a happy condition and I think it's not they that need, well partly they need to feel, I hope that they're not alone, and that what they have needn't hold them back, but also those around them need to know that, er that um, you know, this is something that is, their attitude can make a huge difference.

Trisha Goddard

I noticed, I went onto a website, about my film credits, and I thought, 'Oh this is interesting' and I went on and it said I had been in a number of films, Shaun of the Dead for instance, what have you, and I thought, 'That's pretty good' and then I saw industry, umm sort of, warning or issue, and I thought 'What's that?' and I clicked on that, and this is on the internet, and it said 'Warning, has suffered from depression. May not complete.' So, you know, depression is still a bigger issue on a release form for me than breast cancer, go figure. [Laughs] I, you know, there is more an issue of me not completing a film or a project through depression than a reoccurrence through breast cancer.