

As anyone in the mental health community is aware, there exists a massive stigma against folks with mental illness. Whether you're a doctor or a therapist, a loved one of someone with a mental illness, or have a mental illness yourself it's painfully obvious that this stigma exists. I believe this stigma exists because very few people outside of the mental health community know much of anything about what mental illness really is. I know that I'm not alone in experiencing the pain of lost friends and the isolation and alienation that comes with telling people you have a mental illness.

Prior to my diagnosis in 2007, I had many friends. People I knew from high school whom I would hang out with whenever winter, spring, or summer break came around and we all found ourselves back home. People I'd met at concerts who were glad to see me when I came home on break and happened to go to a show. Dozens of friends, not necessarily all close to me, but people whose loyalty and friendship to me I overestimated. When I was diagnosed, I wanted to be honest with my friends, about the only thing I knew about treating mental illness was that a strong support network would make all the difference in treating my schizoaffective disorder. So I decided to try to find my support network by telling the people I considered my friends. It backfired.

I found myself with an ever-decreasing pool of friends. Some of my friends told me off...told me to get lost, told me to leave them alone. Other friends just stopped answering my calls and text messages. I was left feeling alone, overwhelmed, and extremely discouraged. But some friends stuck with me and I made new friends. I built myself a little community and was incredibly thankful. I adopted the theory that having a mental illness is a good filter - the best filter - for discovering who my *real* friends are. But that community collapsed when I went through ECT (electro-convulsive therapy) from 2009–2010 and I found myself without as many friends, without that community. No one came to visit me during ECT or while I was recovering from it.

I told myself it was that filter again; but as I've thought about it more and more, I came to a realization as to why having a mental illness is so isolating, why mental illness is so alienating. The theory came when I went to visit a friend a couple months after I stopped ECT. She'd had her wisdom teeth out and I'd made her some sweet potato curry to help her feel better. When I got to her parents' house the room she was resting in was occupied by several people who'd come to visit her.

It hurt me.

Getting your wisdom teeth removed is nowhere near as dangerous or drastic as getting ECT: where they shoot so much electricity through your brain so as to give you a seizure - it's like getting struck by lightning over and over again: three days a week for six months. It made me mad, it made me feel even more isolated, more alienated, and like less of a person deserving love and support. But I also had a revelation.

People are scared of what they don't understand, most people don't even realize they still perform ECT. The image they get in their head is like a scene from so many of the movies that wrongly depict mental illness - that it's tantamount to torture.

But wisdom teeth? People *understand* that, it's not nearly as scary, many people have undergone the same surgery...so they can relate. They know how to act around someone who's had their wisdom teeth removed; not so much around a person who's going through ECT. People don't seek to understand what they're afraid of. This theory extends beyond just getting ECT.

People are afraid of mental illness because they don't understand it. To many people, we're the deranged *others* who are capable of great violence, that we're people to be feared.

People don't understand that we're mostly just like them. We breath oxygen, require sustenance, need companionship, and have normal hopes and desires just like any other human. We just happen to have a few character quirks. We're interested in fashion and baseball and chess. We have favorite foods and pet peeves, we're humans just like any other human. We just have these extra peculiarities about us. Some of us have delusions, some of us are paranoid, some of us see and hear (and sometimes smell) things that other people don't, some of us are depressed, some of us have wild mood swings. We're mostly just the same as everyone else...but with these (and more) extra idiosyncrasies about us. So that's why I titled the blog *Mostly* Just Like You.

We're not always entirely there, we're not the most socially savvy people. We think differently be cause we *are* different, but we're not any less human than anyone else because of it. With this blog, I want people to *understand* mental illness. I want them to experience, however vicariously, mental illness through my words. I think if we just *educate* people, if we just try to tell them what it's like and put as human a face as possible on mental illness then we can start to eliminate the fear, which will start to eliminate the stigma. And maybe if we can diminish, or ever wipe out, the stigma the response will be one of love and concern instead of fear and hatred.