Recently, I was at my parents' house trying to take a nap as my mom was in the kitchen watching a cooking show. As I drifted closer to sleep, I heard one of the judges on the show describing a dish he was trying as "psychotic", with another judge on the panel enthusiastically agreeing that the dish was, indeed, psychotic. I immediately wondered if that was a good thing. I count my times being psychotic as some of the most frightening and painful times in my life, psychosis isn't pleasant and I would never use the term to describe something that I was enjoying. But the judge seemed to think it the perfect term to describe a particularly tasty dish.

We have this propensity in our culture to commandeer mental health terms, such as "psychotic", or "schizophrenic", or "crazy", to describe every day things. I've heard weather anchors on local news stations describe a peculiar weather pattern as bipolar or as schizophrenic. Weather can't suffer from delusions or paranoia or psychosis - so why describe it as schizophrenic? Why not describe the weather as cancerous? Or diabetic?

Why describe a plate of food as "psychotic"?

There's a huge distance between a plate of food, hastily and expertly assembled for a TV show judge, and the realities of actually being psychotic.

Real psychosis is painful, real psychosis is traumatizing. I want to avoid psychosis at all costs and I don't think people realize the true implication of what psychosis is. This is one of the things my novel deals with - trying to describe what psychosis is actually like, what the *experience* of it is. I don't think a person is likely to experience anything scarier than psychosis in their every day life. That twisted sense of unbalance, existing on the precipice between sanity and insanity, falling into the deep black void and nearly drowning in the intensity of it. It *hurts*. Physically and emotionally; mentally and spiritually. It can take days to recover from.

A lot of the resistance toward politically correct culture revolves around its tendency to candy-coat certain realities. I won't get into the specifics of it because that's beyond the scope of this blog, but I can see the point behind some of the resistance. And I used to think the same of the mental health community calling for a stop to using terms like crazy, schizophrenic, psychotic, etc. to describe every day things.

But then I got to thinking. Stigma is the number one thing the mental health community is up against with regards to getting more people access to good mental health care. Many people don't seek help for their mental health problem specifically because of the stigma surrounding it.

It's our culture that's the problem, not the illnesses themselves. We have proven, effective treatment for mental illness; I'm living proof of that. The stigma revolves around people with mental illness being perceived as weak, perceived as leeches of society, perceived as being threats to the general population. We are not weak, we are not leeches, we are not a threat.

When we use mental health terms to describe the perfectly ordinary, we're robbing those with mental illnesses of the very terms we're given to describe ourselves, we're lessening their meaning. When a plate of food can be so good it's psychotic, it lessens the impact of me saying that I'm getting psychotic. Using these terms to describe the perfectly ordinary further stigmatizes the mentally ill.

When weather is bipolar, when stock markets are schizophrenic, when ex-girlfriends are crazy we're not using those terms to describe altogether pleasant things. We're using them to describe unpleasant things, things we wish to avoid, things which are bad. So people associate those words with negative things - and the label gets attached to the actual people with those very illnesses. Such that someone with schizophrenia isn't just a person suffering from an illness much like someone with cancer is just a person who happens to have a particular disease that's attacking them, regardless of their moral character. No, suddenly they're *schizophrenic*, they're to be avoided, there's something *wrong* with them. They must be evil, they must be morally corrupt.

And so we depict such people in the media as being morally corrupt, as being evil, as being undesirable at best. We cease to see the person and the illness as separate and instead package them together into one container we label "schizophrenic" and that label connotes all that is most undesirable in the world.

For more on the matter, see this article in Slate from a few years ago.

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But it goes beyond this.

I've realized something about being crazy. Namely, you can be crazy and not have a mental illness. And you can have a mental illness and not be crazy.

"Crazy" is an insufficient word to describe who I am. Just like "schizophrenic" is an insufficient term to describe me. I have schizoaffective disorder, a combination of schizophrenia and bipolar disorder, so to describe me as "schizophrenic" is to ignore half of the struggles I have with regards to my mental health. To describe me as "crazy" doesn't describe the entirety of my situation, I'm not even sure it describes my situation at all.

Does it make me crazy to experience hallucinations or voices in my head? Or is it my reactions to those experiences that make me crazy?

I have a tendency to keep a remarkably level head in very intense situations. A few years ago, my dad and I were walking my dog, Kerrin, when a dog burst through its front door and attacked her. Throughout the whole ordeal I reacted with a remarkable level of rationality.

Kerrin is the most precious thing in the world to me, to lose her, to have her injured would be a tragedy. But when confronted with a very real threat that was trying to injure my beloved dog, I didn't lose my cool and panic, I didn't lose my temper and beat the snot out of the dog. I used exactly enough violence to get the dog away, and then I held the dog until its owner came out to see what all the ruckus was about.

One might think that someone like me, with a severe mental illness, would totally flip out when, out of nowhere, something that extreme happens. One minute we were peacefully walking down the street, and the next, this huge dog was bearing down on my favorite dog in the universe. I should have totally lost it, I should have panicked, I should have reacted irrationally. But no, I kept my head about me and Kerrin managed to survive with only a few minor scrapes and contusions.

It's the same when I get psychotic. I keep that same level head. I go into problem solving mode. I have enough experience with psychosis that I know what I need to do, I know what kind of help I need, I know when I need medication. And so I do what's necessary.

The other week, I had a psychotic dream. In the dream, I was dreaming that I was sleeping. I've trained myself to be able to lucid dream somewhat and so I can exit my dreams at any point I want. But since I was dreaming that I was sleeping, it took me a while to figure out that the person I was calling out for help to was just a part of my dream. I exited the dream and have had enough experience with psychotic dreams/nightmares to know that if I didn't do something about it, I'd just go back into the psychotic dream as soon as I fall asleep.

So I went into the kitchen and found some leftover pizza, took it back into my room and ate it while listening to BBC radio (the radio being the more important part - it gets my subconscious concentrating on something else, so I don't drift back into psychosis). I set the timer on the radio so it would shut off after about half an hour, and, as soon as I finished the pizza, I fell back asleep and slept peacefully the rest of the night.

That's not being crazy. That's being sane in an insane situation. That's being pragmatic.

I have a mental illness, but I'm not crazy. At least, insofar as the definition of crazy is defined by one's *reaction* to their environment. If, to you, crazy means simply experiencing those things in the first place, then I'm about as crazy as they get. But in looking at the more colloquial ways we use crazy, it's almost always in the context of how a person is behaving. It's almost always in the context of their reaction to their situation or environment.

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Was that delicious dish of food really "psychotic"? Did the judge have enough experience with actual psychosis to lend an authoritative weight to his use of the word? Do you really know what you're saying when you describe the stock market as "schizophrenic"? Do you know the true meaning of the word? Do you think someone with schizophrenia would use the term, a term wrought with suggestions of pain, misery, suffering, and loneliness, to describe something that has no feelings, no agency whatsoever?

Mental health deals with a special kind of stigma: this automatic assumption in our society that people with mental illness are weak, inferior, dangerous, and best left in the gutter (oftentimes literally). I think one of the first ways we can combat that stigma is through our use

of language, is through more carefully choosing our words, through thinking about the true

weight of the terms we use to describe the mundane; especially in the face of something as

extra-ordinary as mental illness.