

PART ONE: Read the reflection below by a student who shares how she dealt with the stigma and stereotypes associated with mental illness.

Breaking the Chain of Stigma

by Elizabeth Drucker, age 18

Scientifically and genetically, I may have a mental illness. Call it whatever you want. Just don't call me insane, weird, or crazy.

If you do, you are telling a lie that perpetuates the stigma people with mental illnesses face every day in the United States. Although we have come a long way since the era of the asylum, we still have some unpaved roads to follow.

I often cringe when I hear the word "psycho" used in reference to someone's behavior that is just a little different from what people consider to be normal. The funny thing is, nobody knows what is normal.

Normal could mean one thing here in the U.S. and a completely different thing in Asia. Genes and chemical imbalances in the brain cause most mental illnesses. This is nobody's fault. However, when people perpetuate the chain of stigma, they are making everyone feel worse.

Mental health is an important issue to me because it is one I faced throughout high school, when I was diagnosed with Bipolar Disorder and Obsessive Compulsive Disorder.

Through the conferences I've attended and the volunteer jobs I've worked, I have met many other people with mental illnesses. They strike me as some of the most brilliant and creative people I have ever come in contact with.

In addition, their personal courage to face each day even under the worst circumstances says something about the tenacity of the human condition. Yet stigma still prevails. We go on to label people crazy and weird over and over again.

In the field of mental health advocacy, it's become somewhat of a cliché, but it's true that illnesses

such as depression are illnesses just the same as cancer or diabetes.

Nobody wants to have an illness, yet people with depression often are characterized as lazy and self-indulgent. They are told to just snap out of it.

You wouldn't tell somebody with diabetes that they need to "snap out of it." What makes illnesses of the mind so different?

The most frustrating thing relating to the stigma of mental illnesses is that many people don't seek treatment because they are afraid of what other people will think.

The treatments available today are very effective, and it is disturbing to think of the numbers of people who are simply too embarrassed to get help. As a society, we need to do something about this, fast.

At times, I have felt like I could not be myself simply because of my history.

For example, there was the question of disclosure on my college applications. I wondered if the admissions committee would think I was unstable if I told them about my conditions. In the end, it was a risk I ended up taking. But I am more daring than some.

High school was hard for me, but I ended up coming out of it alive and well. People with mental illnesses can do anything. I persevered and became the salutatorian of my high school class, even though I was too depressed to go to school much of the time.

Think before you use hurtful words to label people you don't even know. The results can be devastating, and you probably wouldn't want to be treated in the same way.

This essay was originally published by <<http://www.tolerance.org>>. Elizabeth Drucker is the author of **But I Just Want a Life**. PublishAmerica, 2008.

This activity is continued on the next page.

* ANSWER ON
LOOSE LEAF - USE
COMPLETE SENTENCES
ANY 5 QUESTIONS

ACTIVITY 9B

BREAKING THE CHAINS OF STIGMA

1. How do you feel when you hear words like *insane*, *crazy*, *psycho* or *mental* used on a day-to-day basis? How do you think this feels to someone with a mental illness?
2. What assumptions do you make about people with psychological disorders? Do you assume that they are less intelligent or talented than other people? Where do your ideas about mental illness come from?
3. What does *normal* mean to you? Who gets to decide what *normal* is? Do you think this is fair?
4. We often attach negative qualities to people with mental disorders. What positive traits might come from living with a psychological disorder?
5. What challenges do people with mental illness face in their lives? How can you be an ally or a support to people who you know with mental illness?
6. We often talk about mental illness as one thing when there are actually many different forms of psychological disorders. What can you do to educate yourself further so that you can avoid stereotyping and generalizing?
7. Consider this statement: "Mental illness is a flaw in biochemistry, not in character." What do you think it means, and do you agree or disagree with it?
8. Research studies have shown that many people who have a psychological disorder (including adults, children and teenagers) don't get treatment. Why do you think people don't seek help? How might a person's life be affected if he or she doesn't seek treatment? Is a person with a mental issue who doesn't seek treatment any different from a person with leukemia or cancer who doesn't seek treatment? Explain your answer.