Mental Illness Education:

The Only Way to Eliminate the Stigma

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Mental health is something that many are not properly educated about. The lack of education has only increased the occurrence of misconceptions and prejudices against the psychiatric population. I must admit that I, myself, have been guilty of this. It was not until I was old enough that my parents explained to me about my uncle's mental condition that I took it upon myself to become somewhat educated about mental illness. My uncle has schizophrenia. He has always had a special place in my heart. That he is different was obvious to me, even as a child. It still maddens me, though, that some disregard him, ignore him, or look on him with pity and disdain. He does many things due to his mind-altering condition. He often says things that are incomprehensible or things that do not make sense. He also talks to himself and laughs at the hidden meanings that only he gathers from the things that he says. However, I try to view him as a beloved and quirky family member who can live a fairly normal life if only he regularly takes his medication.

Additionally, my boyfriend has struggled with acute exacerbations of mental illness with both obsessive-compulsive disorder and generalized anxiety disorder. This totally took me by surprise. I had never witnessed anything from him other than what I would consider normal stress. I saw his anxiety as nothing out of the ordinary until at the end of our first semester of college when it became much more severe and almost debilitating. I, like almost everyone, have had anxious episodes due to certain circumstances that were stressors, but I had a hard time understanding what it was like on a daily basis for him. He struggled daily, through no fault of his own. He battled intrusive thoughts. His compulsions became a tool he used to alleviate his intrusive thoughts and to help relieve his anxiety. It was a very hard situation to navigate. I must say I had no idea how debilitating anxiety can be. It is hard to see any loved one in pain,

especially when they are going through a mental battle that neither they, nor you have any control over. I was terrified, but he was patient with me throughout the entire process. He did the work! In time, he got on the right medications and went to therapy where he was taught lifelong skills to help cope with his anxiety and how to prevent compulsions. Now, he is doing wonderfully, and I know that we can navigate any difficult situations that come our way in the future. I must admit before my experiences with my loved ones I, myself, had preconceived notions about mental illness - that they're scary and that I should, at all costs, avoid emotional entanglements with anyone suffering with any kind of mental illness. With MY education, those feelings no longer exist. My experiences only reiterate to me that education is key in the prevention of preconceptions and misperceptions.

I would say one of my fears is that I would unintentionally judge one of my patients. Even worse, that one of my judgments would be evident on my face when dealing with a patient. I would never want to have any preconceptions that would potentially inhibit me from providing my patients with the most qualitative care. This is why I am eager to learn more. With education comes understanding, which will create a more effective communication, preserve quality relationships, and improve care. This module will provide me with exposure and holistic techniques to treat not just the physical, but the mental psyche as well. I believe that education about mental health and mental illnesses should be a standardized practice in all schools. It is so vital to become educated about because everyone either struggles with or knows someone who struggles with their mental health at one point or another. Having knowledge about mental illness helps people understand how to treat the unseen and respond appropriately.

In this module I would like to be able to find answers to various things that have plagued my mind regarding psychiatric illnesses. I would love to find out more about schizophrenia, not

only for myself but for my other family members as well. I want to gain a clearer image of how I should deal with my uncle when he says outlandish things. Should I ignore him or correct him? I have many questions about how I should relate to him. I am curious to know what thoughts invade my uncle's mind and what his daily mental battles look like. I think that knowing these things will help put me in other people's shoes. I am hoping to gain knowledge of the various nonpharmacologic interventions and techniques for anxiety, and depression. I also hope to find a way to ask the seemingly invasive questions I will have to ask my patients about their mental health in an appropriate and non-invasive manner. I hope this would eliminate potential bias and preconceptions of others. At the end of this module, I hope that I will feel prepared enough to become an advocate for those suffering from mental illness or those loving someone with a mental illness. I hope to educate my peers about the unseen mental battles that people often face and what to do to be able to work through them. I can only hope that the stigma around mental health will be diminished during my lifetime as more people start to realize the importance of not ashamed, seeking help, and talking about it.