

Meeting the Challenge of Mental Illness

The three attractive and talented young people whose stories follow have successfully met the challenge of living with mental illness. As young adults they have accepted their illness and are committed to doing what they need to do to stay healthy. They have all dedicated a portion of their lives to increasing understanding of mental illness and fighting stigma through telling their stories.

Jessica Lynch (Depression)

Jessica is vivacious with luminous, large hazel eyes and a winning smile. It is easy to see how she was chosen to compete in the Miss America contest as Miss New York State 2003. But behind the self-confident, articulate Jessica of today there are years of suffering.



From fourth grade on Jessica struggled desperately to overcome the despair which engulfed her. Till then she had been popular and outgoing, but after two moves in close succession she found herself becoming increasingly more withdrawn.

Jessica was suffering from depression. By 8th grade anorexia had been added as a diagnosis. Finally, weighing only 79 pounds she was hospitalized for a month, but was never treated for her underlying depression.

When she went back to school things were even worse than before. People pretended that nothing had happened, but she always felt they were watching her and talking behind her back. Eventually with the help of medication and therapy she began to recover slowly. But treatment was easy compared to the stigma she faced.

Embarrassed by her hospitalization she spent high school denying it had ever happened. She did, however, begin counseling other students through a program called Lifeline. Of that experience she says, “Although I was amazed at how many others seemed to be suffering from similar problems, I was afraid of how they would react if I, the straight A ‘perfect’ student, admitted to being ‘crazy’.”

One bright spot in her senior year, however, was The Miss America Organization. She began competing in pageants and started to tell her story, but only spoke about her depression as if it was in the past. The same pattern continued in college, but in reality she was so depressed she could barely get out of bed, rarely went to class, drank too much, and almost failed.

Eventually she went back on medication and even managed to graduate from college a year early, but when she moved to New York to pursue a theatrical career she again went off her medication. Soon her depression came back worse than ever. Now she cried all the time, couldn’t keep a job, and felt hopeless.

But despite this she somehow managed to resume treatment and it worked. Suddenly one cold February morning she woke up and things were different. She returned calls, got out of bed and started to live life again. Today she uses her platform as Miss NYS to serve as a role model for others and is dedicated to “helping them see through the darkness”. With the scholarship money she has received from competing in the Miss America contest she hopes to obtain a graduate degree in journalism or go on to law school.

Ross Szabo (Bipolar Disorder)

Ross still remembers vividly the day he committed his young life to fighting stigma. He seethed with anger as he listened to a guest speaker in his senior high Psychology class regale the students with one humorous anecdote after another, at the expense of people diagnosed with schizophrenia. The class laughed as he talked about a man who said he was waiting for a plane to Venus and thought it was hilarious that someone actually believed he was Winnie the Pooh. Finally, Ross couldn't stand it any more and bounded out of the room, closely followed by his psychology teacher.

"I have bipolar disorder," said Ross, "and I'm not going to sit there and let him make fun of people like me." In short order his sensitive teacher had signed him up to speak to his fellow students about what mental illness is *really* like. Ross held the class spellbound as he told *his* story, and deeply moved his classmates with the reality of what it feels like to suffer from bipolar disorder.

Since then Ross has made speaking to students around the country about mental health issues his mission. As Director of Youth Outreach for the National Mental Health Awareness Campaign and a speaker for Campuspeak, Inc, he inspires young people with the courage to talk to someone about similar feelings by sharing his story.



He tells about his manic highs—racing thoughts that came so fast that it was like switching rapidly from one channel to the other with no opportunity to stop at any one. And he describes playing varsity basketball and believing himself to be not only as good as Michael Jordan, but *better*, though viewing the tape after the game revealed him to be just an average player.

He talks too about the lows—feelings of depression that despite his popularity and many successes made him feel that life wasn't worth living. He thought of killing himself twenty-four hours a day. Fortunately, a chance encounter with his father as he was about to attempt suicide prevented him from following through with his plan. He was hospitalized and finally got the help he needed.

Ross also tells audiences how stigma made him put on a "happy face". In a magazine interview Ross says "I always thought I should be able to deal with it. I wanted to fit in, and felt that by admitting I could not deal with problems people would view me as being weird or weak. Thinking like this almost killed me."

Today Ross is proud to say that he is a graduate of American University in Washington, DC. He has been the subject of feature stories in Seventeen and Parade Magazine and has appeared nationally on network and cable TV. For more about Ross go to www.nostigma.org. or www.behindhappyfaces.com and read the book he co-authored, *Behind Happy Faces: Taking Charge of Your Mental Health (a guide for young adults)*, based on the content of his popular school presentations.

Meera Popkin (Schizophrenia)

Meera spent a grueling weekend learning and rehearsing the song and dance routine over and over again until she got it just right. Monday she would audition for the famed director/composer, Stephen Schwartz, who was casting his new, soon to open Broadway musical, "Wicked", and she knew the competition would be fierce. Of course, she hoped she would make it into the chorus, but getting a part would just be icing on the cake. The important thing was that, despite her disability, she had proved to herself that she could concentrate well enough to master difficult and unfamiliar material. Thanks to medication, therapy, and lots and lots of help from her friends, family, and support groups, Meera was ready to get her career back on track again and audition.

There was a time when this had all seemed easy. She played Miss Saigon in the London cast of “Miss Saigon” and was in the Broadway cast of Andrew Lloyd Weber’s “Cats” and “Starlight Express”. Then something happened to her thinking. It became muddled and Meera says her judgment was poor. Her parents saw no alternative, but to hospitalize her – twice. The diagnosis was schizophrenia and her world came crashing down. She lost her house, car, and boy friend, not to mention her spirit and confidence. Seriously depressed she wondered how she could ever get her life back on track.

Fortunately, Meera is a fighter and has refused to accept the limits of her illness. “It’s just like a broken leg and you need to work hard to get better.” At first she thought she could make it without medication. She did brain exercises, yoga, and practiced martial arts. But it wasn’t enough. Eventually she realized she needed medication and slowly began to resume a normal life. Today she studies voice, acting, takes dance classes, and is engaged to be married. She says she has found inspiration in regularly attending services at her Temple and credits the strength she has found in prayer and meditation with facilitating her recovery. Like almost all temporarily unemployed actors she makes a living waiting tables while she waits and works for that next big break.



Follow-up Questions

- 1. What impact did stigma have on their lives? Consider such things as reluctance to seek treatment, living a lie, and social isolation.**
 - Many people with mental illness say that stigma is worse than the disease itself.
 - Students can make life easier for friends with a mental illness by educating themselves about the disorder, maintaining social contact, and listening empathetically to their problems.
 - Encourage a friend or family member to seek treatment when needed. If they are resistant don’t afraid to act by sharing your concerns with a caring adult in your school such as a guidance counselor, school psychologist, or coach. If you believe a family member has a mental illness seek out the help of a sibling, parent, or relative in getting them into treatment.
- 2. What symptoms of mental illness did each display?**
 - Jessica had three co-occurring disorders: depression, anorexia, and alcohol abuse. She was withdrawn and socially isolated, a perfectionist who tried to get control of her life by starving herself, and drank excessively.
 - Ross had manic highs (racing thoughts, delusions of grandeur) which alternated with depressive lows. He was suicidal.
 - Meera had a thought disorder which her parents recognized as a distinct personality change.
- 3. What personal qualities have helped them meet the challenge of mental illness? Discuss the role resilience has played in their recovery.**
 - They are self-motivated, have a strong sense of self-worth and persevere despite serious obstacles.
- 4. What strategies have helped them cope with mental illness?**
 - All three are taking responsibility for their recovery. They have educated themselves about their disorder, continue in treatment, and gain strength from educating the public about stigma and mental illness.
 - They have set personal career or life goals for themselves and work hard to achieve them despite their illness.