

Opinion

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Saluting the bravest people in the world

The next time you do your Saturday grocery shopping at Wegmans or Tops, take a minute to look at your fellow shoppers. You'll see the usual range of young, old, rich, and poor walking through the aisles. Nothing out of the ordinary, really. Except that some of these people are mentally ill — and are the bravest people you'll ever meet.

As you walk the aisles, you'll be a bit puzzled by the calm — you probably won't see anyone talking to themselves, staring at you, or yelling incoherently. That's because most mentally ill people act and dress like you and me.

Even if you strike up a conversation with a mentally ill shopper, you probably won't notice anything out of the ordinary — and at the moment they won't strike you as doing anything particularly courageous.

Appearances are deceiving.

For example, the man at the bakery is showing incredible, silent courage in buying rolls despite the chorus of voices in his head screaming that the baker is trying to poison him.

And that smiling lady in bulk foods is bravely appearing in public despite her husband's departure due to the chaos caused by her cycle of depressive lows and manic highs.

Finally, that quiet teenager in the produce section is secretly fighting for his life, desperately resisting suicidal impulses because depression has crushed the joy and meaning from his existence.

These Ithaca shoppers suffer from different forms of mental

Bruce McKee / Guest Columnist



Why should you care? Major mental illness affects an estimated 20 percent of Ithaca families, and 7 percent of the Ithaca high school senior class will develop a major mental illness in their lifetime.

illness — schizophrenia, manic depression, and clinical depression. These illnesses are caused by biochemical imbalances in their brain — conditions that typically begin during or before early adulthood and will last through each person's life.

The impact of these imbalances is devastating — without treatment, many of these people will be unable to hold jobs or maintain meaningful relationships with their loved ones. Many end up homeless/incarcerated, and a distressing percentage commit suicide. Yet many persevere silently, living diminished lives because of the intense societal stigma about major mental illness.

We feel that this stigma should be broken, and that their bravery should be recognized.

Why should you care? Major mental illness affects an estimated 20 percent of Ithaca families, and 7 percent of the Ithaca high school senior class will develop a major mental illness in their lifetime. But with modern treatments and medicine, many of these young people can successfully manage their illnesses and

lead productive and fulfilling lives.

To celebrate this possibility, NAMI Finger Lakes — an Ithaca-based support, education, and advocacy organization for families dealing with mental illness — is sponsoring a Fall education program in observance of National Mental Illness Awareness Week (Oct. 1-7).

Our program theme is "Empathy: What is it like to live with a Mental Illness?" Our goal is to show how mental illness impacts the lives of our loved ones; the challenges they face in living a normal life; and to recognize their courage in persevering in the face of personal pain and societal stigma.

The first program runs from today through Sept. 29, with an information table at the Tompkins County Public Library. The table features books and pamphlets on all major mental illnesses, along with biographies and autobiographies of famous people who suffered from mental illness — such as Abraham Lincoln (major depression).

The second program is at 6:45

p.m. Tuesday, Sept. 19 at the Tompkins County Public Library. Rachel Greco will talk about how her Bipolar Disorder has affected her life, and how she manages her illness while pursuing a fulfilling personal and professional life.

The third program is Oct. 17-19, and will show you the inner world of schizophrenia — a brain disorder that creates delusions, hallucinations, and disordered thinking and speech.

NAMI-Finger Lakes will sponsor showings of the Janssen Pharmaceutica "Schizophrenia Symptom Simulator" — a virtual reality machine that uses a computer, video goggles and headphones to simulate the frightening delusions and auditory and visual hallucinations associated with untreated schizophrenia. Those viewing the simulator will know that people diagnosed with schizophrenia are truly the bravest of the brave.

In summary, we encourage you to attend our events (details are at www.namifingerlakes.org) and learn how major mental illness impact friends, families, and your community — and that with proper treatment and support many people can lead good lives.

And afterwards, when you are at the supermarket, please consider silently applauding those fellow shoppers as they bravely struggle — and often triumph — with their mental illness.

Bruce McKee is co-president, NAMI-Finger Lakes, the local chapter of the National Alliance on Mental Illness.