



What I want my Neighbors to Know about my Mental Illness

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I live in an apartment complex in a busy part of my town. From my second-floor balcony, I can see my neighbors coming and going from their jobs, appointments, and other activities. I don't really know any of my neighbors on a personal level. I live a rather isolated life except for occasional visits from my family. So, my interactions with my neighbors consist of a polite "Hello, how are you?" or "Have a nice day," exchanges. I sometimes wonder how they would react towards me if they knew I have a diagnosed severe mental illness.

Most people know that a mental illness involves one's thinking or behavior. However, people may not know that all mental illnesses can be treated with a combination of medication and/or therapy. I take antipsychotic medications and also an antidepressant. Together these medications help me control my schizophrenic symptoms. To look at me, one would think I was physically fit, well groomed, and reasonably healthy. Although my disease is not outwardly detectable, it does greatly affect my life, just as heart disease, respiratory disease, or some other illness might affect someone else.

If my neighbors found out that I have schizophrenia, I would want them to know that I am not a danger to them. I would not want them to believe the stigma that comes with schizophrenia. I do not own a gun, and I am not a serial killer. In fact, it is more likely that I would be the victim of a crime rather than the criminal. If my neighbors found out about my diagnosis of schizophrenia I would do my best to start a dialogue, and let them know that the medications I take control my schizophrenic impulses.

I would want them to know that I do have a productive life as a writer and mental health advocate. Words can be powerful, or at least they can be, if used in the right way. I use my words as an advocate to educate people about what it is like to live every day with a brain disease. There is no question about my mental illness that I am afraid to answer, and if I cannot answer I would do my best to find the answer. I volunteer with mental health advocacy groups because connecting with people and sharing my story outweighs any financial gain I might receive from my writing.

I have always enjoyed physical exercise. From my balcony I can see some of my neighbors' playing sports. I love to play basketball, and there is a new basketball court near my apartment. I would want my neighbors to know that I would enjoy being invited to play pick-up basketball or volleyball with them. I also enjoy working out, and there is a great fitness center in my apartment complex. It would be great to have a workout buddy since being active helps me manage my symptoms.

Although they might not see lots of people coming and going from my apartment, I would want them to know that sometimes I like to have company--just someone to hang out with or watch a ballgame with. I have a large collection of vinyl records and would love to show off my jazz collection to them. I also like to cook and would enjoy cooking for other people, not just myself. Maybe a neighbor and I could cook together. The combination of a home-made dinner and good jazz sounds like a wonderful evening to me.

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I would also like for my neighbors to know that I am an American patriot. I am a veteran having served my country in the United States Army. I love the fact that America is a country of diversity. Many of my neighbors come from around the world to work at a large banking company close by. Much of what makes us a great country is that we appreciate the unique contributions that come from all our citizens.

Those of us who have a mental health diagnosis want to be accepted for who we are and not because we have a particular diagnosis. We are productive members of society and make major contributions to our society every day. Since one in four people are affected by mental illness, it is safe to say that every profession has members who struggle everyday to fight the stigma that surrounds

mental illness. I've never met anyone who I could not relate to in some way. In talking, we can always find that we have things in common. I would jump at the opportunity to explore some of those commonalities with some of my neighbors.

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