



The Stigma of Mental Illness and Suicide

A few decades ago, many Americans could barely bring themselves to say the “C-word” because of the stigma that was associated with cancer. The same thing is true today regarding mental illness and its lethal stepchild, suicide. Suicide is still such a taboo in our society that most people are uncomfortable even talking about it. The tainted aura surrounding mental illness is why few people want it known that they’re receiving psychiatric care. That’s a tragedy measured in human lives, because many who suffer from depression and other serious mental illnesses refuse to get treatment due to the irrational stigma attached to diseases of the brain.

Just as diabetes is a disorder of the pancreas, mental illnesses are medical conditions that can interfere with the ability to cope with the ordinary demands of life. Nobody asks to be bi-polar or schizophrenic, or to be afflicted with chronic anxiety or a borderline personality. In many cases, people with these illnesses – or worse, combinations of them – end up taking their lives because they didn’t get help. Margene never got the help she needed, and the stigma of mental illness was partly to blame. She was a private person, and would not have wanted anyone outside of her immediate family to know that she needed psychiatric care. Instead of seeking help, she suffered in silence, a choice that led to her death.

Nine months before she passed, we went to a memorial service for Justin’s close friend, Bryan Carey. A 38 year old anesthesiologist at Northside Hospital, Bryan took his life in May 2009. After seeing Bryan’s devastated parents, Margene said to me on the way home, *I don’t see how anybody could ever commit suicide and do that to their family.* I remember thinking to myself that if she were to die before me, at least I wouldn’t have to worry about her taking her own life. The fact that I had such a thought shows how poorly informed I was about the deadly power of mental illness.

I’m not the least bit ashamed for people to know that my wife killed herself -- I’ve volunteered that information many times to clerks at grocery stores and other strangers I’ve come in contact with. The way I see it, Margene died of diseases just as potentially lethal as cancer and diabetes, not because of a character flaw. She’s gone now, and there’s nothing I can do to bring her back. What I can do are things that honor her memory, including whatever I can to help reduce the unfair stigma attached to mental illness and suicide.