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Our Failure to Understand Mental Illness has Debilitated Nearly 60 Million Americans

By Alaina Bernard
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Abraham Lincoln, Ernest Hemingway, Robin Williams and Michelangelo are a few examples of brilliantly inspiring individuals who shaped our culture, artistry and society. Looking at this list of names, it is hard to see a connection between these unique individuals. The sad truth is that each one suffered from mental illness, a debilitating disease that disrupts one's thinking, feelings and interactions with others.

According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness, approximately 57.7 million Americans endure a mental illness in a given year. This includes depression, bipolar disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety and panic disorder, and schizophrenia, to name a few. This illness is nondiscriminatory without regard to race, age, social status or gender. About 25 percent of college students have been treated or diagnosed with a mental illness.

In 2013, my father was sadly added to the growing list of individuals diagnosed with mental illness. My family quickly entered into the world of mental-illness treatments, including medicines and the poorly perceived method of electro-convulsion therapy. We found that the resources for individuals and families dealing with this medical condition were scarce, with few available outpatient programs.

His recovery exclusively fell on my mother who advocated for well-being. The long-term, home-care options were non-existent and the only way we survived the storm was through the support of our family and friends and the few exceptional medical personnel who were drawn to supporting his case.

How can our nation, one that has flown to the moon, developed western medicine to treat other devastating illnesses, and produced some of the most inspiring artist known, not be able to provide the resources needed to about 60 million people suffering daily?

Our failure to create a system that provides necessities to individuals adversely affected by this disease has resulted in terrible shootings, overpopulation in jails, and huge medical-care cost for crisis intervention. By 1992, it was estimated that around 7 percent of inmates were seriously mentally ill, and of that, a quarter were being held awaiting a bed in a psychiatric hospital.

The history of mental-illness treatment has been just as sad as the illness itself. Dating back centuries, people with this disorder where locked in isolated areas, subjected to painful and horrendous experiments, and cast from society. In the 1840s, Dorothea Dix, an American activist and superintendent of Army nurses during the Civil War, observed this trend and petitioned to establish 32 state hospitals for the mentally ill. By the late 1800s, the hospitals had become overcrowded, creating inhumane living conditions.

In the 1930s, electro-convulsion therapy medically induced comas and lobotomies, or the removal of parts of the brain, were the few strategies used to treat the ill. In the mid-1960s, many sick individuals were released from the hospitals, leaving them homeless and without treatment, and the state hospitals began closing, assuming people who needed help would find local institutions. This is still the strategy used today, which has created a culture of helplessness for families and those experiencing mental illness.

Our country was founded on the principles of liberty and justice for all, but our failure to understand mental illness and provide assistance facilities for families and the ill, has ripped away the liberty and justice deserved for 60 million Americans.

We have the opportunity to change this culture by becoming active in organizations, such as NAMI, and vigorously lobbing for better health care, insurance coverage, and understanding of this disease. We need to stand united to provide stabilization and recovery to those in need, and create a culture of community and understanding.

I encourage you to think about someone in your life that is impacted by this illness, and reach out to them, offering support. This one step could start to create a trend in which those who suffer are not judged, but sustained in seeking treatment, and provide hope to the hopeless.

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