

HEALTH

OPINION

In my story and those of others, opportunities to demystify mental illness



REBECCA PHILLIPS

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Mental illness can happen to anyone, writes Rebecca Phillips, but too often we hear about it exclusively when something bad happens. (Getty Images)

Kansas Reflector welcomes opinion pieces from writers who share our goal of widening the conversation about how public policies affect the day-to-day lives of people throughout our state. Rebecca Lyn Phillips is a published author, speaker and mental health advocate.

I was an overachiever big-time growing up. I attended a private, Christian school in Topeka, and I also signed a book contract with a major publisher in Nashville when I was just 15 years old. I also had a baby-sitting business and was involved in track, orchestra, choir and several musicals and plays. Never did I think I would be diagnosed with a mental illness, let alone schizophrenia.

“Schizophrenia?!” I thought to myself when they told my mom and me at the psychiatric hospital in the cold winter of 1994. I thought they were telling me I was stupid and not smart anymore. I thought they were telling me I would never amount to anything and I might as well just roll over and die.

Unfortunately, too many folks end up thinking similar thoughts when they or a loved one is diagnosed with a serious mental illness. It can happen to anyone. I have a good friend who has schizophrenia who attended Mount Holyoke and received a bachelor's degree in political science and an M.B.A. from Baker. Her dad was a doctor and they were a close family.

Yes, mental illness can happen to anyone.

So much of the time, however, we only hear about mental health when a shooting happens or something else that is terrible and disturbing. Words like “nutcase” or “psycho” or “crazy” or “schizo” are often used to describe someone who is a bad person.



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I was filmed in a national documentary several years ago, and the psychologist in the short film, Xavier Amador, is consulted by many powerful organizations and law enforcement to discuss people who end up doing things when they were psychotic.

Amador, who taught at Columbia and travels the world to speak to professionals about communicating with people with mental illness, is a true advocate of the mentally ill. He was Bethenny Frankel's counselor in New York City. He also had a brother with schizophrenia who he talks about in his book, “I'm Not Sick, I Don't Need Help.” He helps people learn how to help their loved one accept treatment even when they don't think they have a problem.

So many hot topics in today's society relate to mental health and its challenges – from health insurance, like Medicaid, to housing, to law enforcement, to stigma, to family support. My mom, Claire, helps teach a family support group for our local NAMI, the National Alliance on Mental Illness. The other three ladies who guide the group are brave and compassionate. That is just what it takes to deal with the issues and challenges that those with mental illness present. Mental illness is not a bad behavior or a sin: It is a chemical imbalance in the brain. And yes, the brain is a physical part of the body. It's all connected.

Valeo CEO Bill Persinger has one of the biggest jobs in Topeka trying to figure out how to help people in need, many of whom arrive at Valeo underinsured or not insured at all. With the implementation of KanCare, the three managed-care companies that make up Kansas Medicaid, many behavioral health care providers have had to rise to the immense and incredible challenge of dealing not with one managed care company, but three. Medicaid cuts haven't been kind to providers either.

Housing is another huge issue that affects too many with serious mental health challenges. Breakthrough House, another Topeka nonprofit organization, offers several group homes, but what is really needed is about 25 group homes.

Breakthrough House staff does their best to try to help individuals find shelter. They also have a clubhouse in the former Social Security building downtown where clients can come for meals and support. They help them get housing, help them in their pursuit of finding a job or going back to school, or volunteering.



So, is there recovery for people with mental illness? I am a firm believer in recovery, but it is more of a recovery journey, not a destination, because there is no cure or magical healing. I continue to share because without talking about mental illness and its challenges, there can be no understanding of how to offer help and hope.

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The third program is a financial management service where the clients get help paying their rent and other bills. Financial abuse is a huge issue as well for folks with mental illness. Too often they are taken advantage of and misused. I have two friends who have boyfriends who use them for their money and their family's money.

Recent news about Brittney Spears' situation has raised the subject of guardianship or conservatorship, which is when a person with mental illness has someone who makes financial and other types of decisions for them. These relationships can too often become abusive.

Another important issue is law enforcement and how the police respond to mental health crisis. Many police departments have Crisis Intervention Team officers who have been trained in learning how to respond to these situations.

I have spoken at the annual Topeka CIT Training and showed the documentary I was in for the past eight years, except last year. Too often, across the nation, officers don't understand how to communicate with these folks in need and in crisis. The Topeka Police Department does a great job, however.

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Since it is Mental Health Awareness Month, every one of us needs to ask ourselves, “How can I reach out to those in need? How can I help end stigma and start the conversation regarding mental illness?”

By starting a conversation in one's family or at a coffee shop with friends or anywhere else, one can dare to care and dare to offer a glimmer of hope. There is hope. There is a way to recovery. We just need to open our eyes and be brave. We need to reach beyond our comfort zone, and take a step outside our door into the big world of knowledge and compassion.

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Rebecca Lyn Phillips is a published author, speaker and mental health advocate. Several years ago, she was filmed in a national documentary about mental illness. The national premiere was in Washington, D.C., and she has traveled nationwide to share her story. Five years ago, she was also published in Guideposts magazine, which reaches 2 million readers each month. For nine years, she has shared at the Topeka Police Department for the annual Crisis Intervention Team training. Rebecca is a firm believer in recovery.

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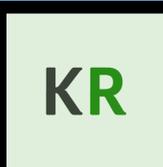
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