

## Invisible Illness

We are a writing group who have come together because we are involved in a government- funded project, helping us to deal with stress and anxiety. Invisible illness became a common denominator. We all have first-hand experience of various types of physical and mental illness.

Mental Illness is an umbrella term for so many types of conditions which are invisible to most. However for the person suffering and people around them, it can rule their lives. So many people lack understanding when it comes to dealing with the individual, but thankfully support is improving. It's about time! Being someone who has suffered in silence for many years, I am grateful to have been given a voice. Trying to explain to others what is going on in your head, when you don't know yourself, is torture. Now that I have found the support from both government-funded organisations and charities, I can be who I am without stigma or judgement . I am no longer subjected to comments like "it will pass" or "pull yourself together ". Well, not as often anyway! Just because depression and anxiety are not visible, people should not make assumptions . Fighting with yourself on a daily basis can affect every single part of your life; unfortunately, those who are closest to you are also affected too. People deal with issues in different ways. Never judge a book by its cover because every story is unique. Tamsin

What do you think when you hear the word dementia? An old person who just sits staring into space drooling, muttering or shouting at nothing? Well let me introduce you to my husband, Bill. He is a fit, healthy man in his mid-sixties and chats away to anyone who will listen. Bill is funny and so caring, and will offer a helping hand to anyone in distress. Two years ago he was given a diagnosis of Early Onset Dementia and it is amazing how quickly people make judgments. Some pity him, some ignore him, some talk down to him and some treat him like a child, speaking to me rather than to him. Yet, Alzheimer's disease is only a small part of who he is. He is a husband, a father, a grandfather , a brother and a friend. These roles can never be taken from him! He is still able to work at a local hospital, take part in local church services and makes a "mean cup of tea". As a volunteer for the Alzheimer's Society, his special gift is making people laugh. As the disease progresses he may lose some, if not all of these abilities, however the essence of who he is will always remain. If you are tempted to judge him when he makes an inappropriate comment or gesture, try to see beyond this behaviour and have compassion for Bill whose brain is deteriorating slowly, but irretrievably. We live in a society that is quick to voice opinions, often based on ignorance and fear. Dementia is a disease of the brain. It is a physical illness, not a mental illness. There are over one hundred kinds, with Alzheimer's being the most common sort. There needs to be more research into the causes and cures. Most of all there needs to be more education so that people are not so quick to judge or isolate someone like my husband. Let us be careful of the words we choose and always make sure that we don't disable the person with dementia by taking choices away from them. Give them the opportunities to voice their own opinions and make their own decisions. There may come a time when this is not possible. Jane

A "One Punch Incident" can bring stress and tension on a daily basis for the victims and their families, sending ripples out like 'a pebble in the pond' . Everyone can be touched by the ebb and flow of everyday crises. You feel lost and isolated when you speak to trained experts, because the victim won't admit to there being a problem. There are times when people see you with a smile on your face and think you are coping but no one sees the abuse that goes on behind closed doors. The list is endless but some of these manifestations such as refusing to take medication , doors slamming so hard until the hinges come loose, refusing to eat the food you have prepared and cooking their own. Only later you find that the oven is still on. Barbecuing a pizza ( now that can't be right). Finding a half empty tub of Philadelphia on top of the wall cupboard ( what's that doing up there?). Having to hide knives and your own medication because of the victim attempting suicide. You wake every morning not knowing what is going to happen; verbal insults flying around as well as your clothes, as you are being ordered out of your own house. Threatening to set fire to the

house and emotions change as quick as snapping your fingers. Mix a brain injury with alcohol and it is a potent cocktail which can bring on dementia sooner than it would develop naturally. Linda

My silent illness was Sarcoidosis. I looked 'normal'. I had no crutches or bandages, but sheer exhaustion and hidden pain. Doctors at first diagnosed 'Tired all the time' ( T.O.T.T.)or depression, friends thought it was the menopause but I seriously thought I was dying. I had Sarcoidosis which is a rare autoimmune disease . Your immune system attacks and damages soft tissue in your body. It changed my life. At the age of forty nine I was self-employed and owned a successful business. I had to sell the business and concentrate on getting well. It took five years of chemotherapy. I am lucky and am now well but I want to raise awareness for those who are not so fortunate. There are more than eighty different autoimmune disorders. Some we are familiar with, rheumatoid arthritis, multiple sclerosis, coeliacs and lupus. No one has ever cured any of these. They are often chronic and life-limiting. In terms of publicity and funding our amazing immune system has plodded along in the shadow of the terrible disease of cancer. However cancer research has discovered that our immune system can be used to help our bodies fight and even eradicate cancer cells. At last immunotherapy is being taken seriously. Cancer can be defeated and surely it follows that autoimmune diseases will be treated and even cured. Catherine

We have given four personal examples of invisible illness. Pain has many faces. People suffer inside their homes, their bodies and their heads. Professionals please listen to us. The rest of you do not judge. The fact that something is invisible does not mean it is not real.

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