

CULTIVATING COMPASSION

WHAT A PATIENT WITH MENTAL ILLNESS WANTS DOCTORS TO KNOW BY JULIE BENN

WE'RE IN THIS together, you and me. And whether I come to you for a broken bone or osteophytes in my ears, thyroid problems, strep throat, or any other myriad ailments, there's something about me you should know.

I have mental illness. Whether you gather this from the large number of psychiatric medications on the med list I just handed to you, or you read the diagnoses I scribbled down in the "pre-existing conditions" section on the patient intake form (where there is never enough room to list all of them), or I actually screw up my courage to the sticking place and outright tell you myself, I do have it and I thought you should know.

If that makes you feel uncomfortable, don't worry, I'm likely much more scared of you than you are of me. Not because you've done anything wrong, we've just met after all. But because I am afraid you will think me to be crazy and dismiss who I am. I am afraid after you scan the long list of conditions that reads like an eye chart (OCD, MDD, PTSD, ADD, DD, GAD, etc) you will label me incompetent before our first hello. I am afraid that you will not see me but rather a pre-conceived notion of what I might be and how difficult it may be to treat someone like me.

Maybe you've had hard experiences with folks who have mental illness that feed into an image of non-compliance. Or perhaps you've seen the latest news story of another mass shooting and that makes you wary of anyone who might experience unstable moods. Or maybe, just maybe, mental illness is something you or a loved one also experience, and the pain of potentially seeing mirrored symptomology is, at the very least, distracting.

All of these scenarios have validity to them, and I am not saying you are wrong for thinking of them before you shake my hand. I am just saying, well, look at me. Everyone who has mental illness experiences it differently. We are all unique and individual, and while I may have the same diagnoses of someone you've had trouble with in the past, I'm still me sitting here in my paper gown before you. I'm not them.

And even if something happens and I get triggered because of past traumas as perhaps other patients have, please know that this snapshot in time of my experience is not the sum of who I am, nor was it likely the complete picture of who they are. People who live with mental illness are not defined by their disorder, or, at least, they shouldn't be. After all, we have mental illness, not the other way around.

At any rate, here we are together now, you and me. As long as we're both here, why don't we form a partnership? Here's what I'd like to have happen:

Tell me what you are going to do before you do it, and keep me informed as you go along. Keep talking. Let me know how long a particular procedure or part of the exam will take. Keep me posted as it happens.

Sometimes it is hard for me to focus, especially in potentially scary situations (like this) when I am getting a diagnosis or prognosis. Please be very clear with me and help me remember by writing things down for me or encouraging me to do so. Draw diagrams or use other visual aids, as I may be able to remember those easier.

If you are prescribing medication, please let me know what it is for and if/how it could affect my other medications or mental health conditions.

When you hand me the prescription, let me know you believe it will help me, and if it doesn't, we can still work together to find something else that can.

Encourage me to ask questions and speak up about concerns. Please be patient with your patient. When I am distressed, sometimes I tend to go mute and it may take me a bit longer to form my sentences. Let me know that's OK, and possibly offer me some paper to write it out if I can't put voice to my words at the moment.

Be open to me wanting to do my own research too. Not that I'm disagreeing with you, I just mainly want to be an informed patient and learn more about whatever condition I am experiencing. It will help me feel less out of control and will potentially help us communicate down the line.

What can you expect of me in return? When the lines of communication are open and I feel safe with you, I will try my very best to be compliant and work with you — not against you. I will view us as a team. I will sing your praises in the form of referrals. And, when you treat me with kindness and compassion, I promise that I will remember you forever, doc. **SDP**

Julie Benn is the communications specialist for NAMI San Diego. After graduating with degrees in journalism and psychology, Julie spent a decade working as an award-winning journalist and advertising copywriter in various San Diego businesses before joining NAMI San Diego and in 2006. Julie brings her unique experience as a person who lives with mental illness to her position, enabling her to offer an "insider" perspective to the work she does for NAMI.