

ERASING THE STIGMA of mental illness

My mother committed suicide. She died 36 years ago at the age of 53 from untreated, end-stage depression. I was 26 and had reaped the benefits of a loving, devoted mother. All I could do was watch helplessly as she fought the overwhelming symptoms of anxiety and despair.

Mom's death was a tragic loss, but I found comfort knowing she was finally at peace, free from the bondage of a devastating illness over which she had no control. What made it unbearable was the reaction to her death.

It was never discussed. My Dad didn't talk about it. My brother, sister and I went through the motions of her funeral and burial, but never spoke of it. Friends and neighbors avoided it. Our pastor couldn't even look us in the eye because of it.

Had "it" been cancer, heart disease or complications of diabetes, there would have been plenty of talking and crying and hugging. But what happened to my mother was unspeakable.

I was angry then, but now I understand. In those days, little was known about mental illness. Many actually believed it might be demon possession. Ignorance is scary and a stigma is often attached to that which we don't understand.

Sadly, more than three decades later the stigma still exists. THAT makes me mad. We know better today. In the hands of trained medical professionals, treatment for most depressive disorders is entirely effective. And still, many suffer in silence because of the "stigma."

I know. Along with her curly hair, I inherited my mother's clinical depression. I was 34 when extreme anxiety and depression overwhelmed me. I was sure life as I knew it was over. I was blessed. I had support. An excellent psychiatrist worked with me until we found the right medication. A skilled psychologist helped me learn what I could do to help myself. Within weeks, my symptoms subsided and I got back my joy.

I still have depression. It's a chronic condition for which I gratefully take medication every day. It's no big deal. Really.

Why all the discomfort, shame and behind-the-back whispers when it comes to mental illness? With all that can go wrong with our bodies, who decided that our brain with its complex chemistry that controls our moods, emotions, sleep patterns and appetites should be exempt?! I could, after all, have chronic asthma, severe allergies, insulin-dependant diabetes or high blood pressure and feel perfectly free to discuss it with most anyone. No one should be made to feel guilty or at fault because of a medical condition.

February is Mental Health Awareness month. Let's talk about it. It's time for mental illness to get some respect from a society that still wants to believe in demons.