

Interview with Evonne Agnello About Mental Illness

In July 2012, Evonne Agnello spent four days in Seattle among 1,700 people from across the country who work in mental health and/or are consumers of mental health services. It was the national convention of NAMI, the National Alliance on Mental Illness. Here is some of what she learned:

How prevalent is mental illness?

1 in 4 Americans will have a serious mental illness sometime during their life.

1 in 17 Americans will have a serious mental illness this year.

Each day in America, about 100 people take their lives—one every 15 minutes—and 90% of the suicides are related to mental illness.

What is mental illness?

It's highly complex, but at NAMI one speaker brought forth an understandable metaphor, "Mental illness occurs when the brain's circuits—where the neurons travel—are disrupted, like a train off the tracks." For healing to occur, repairs are needed—and these can come from talk therapy, medicine, electricity, meditation, and most recently, magnets. (In 2011, the FDA approved a treatment called TMS, Transcranial Magnetic Stimulation.)

Why should those suffering from mental illness have hope?

After decades of *treating* mental illness, researchers now use the words *recovery*, *cure* and *eliminate*.

"Neuro-science is now supporting a recovery model for brain disorders and it didn't just a few years ago," according to former Harvard brain researcher Dr. Jill Bolte Taylor in her 2012 talk at NAMI. People with trauma are having recovery by neuro-genesis—the growth of new brain cells that re-build connections. Taylor's eighteen-minute talk, *My Stroke of Insight*, has been the second most-watched TED talk for a long time. Her remarkable book with the same title, about what she learned during and after suffering her own stroke, was published in 2009.

In 2012, a new organization was launched, One Mind for Research (1mind4research.org), whose goal is to *eliminate brain disease—and its stigma—in ten years*. It was co-founded by Patrick Kennedy (son of the late Ted Kennedy) who struggled for twenty-five years with depression, alcoholism, and drug addiction, before quitting politics in 2006 to devote his life to this cause. Launched on the 50th anniversary of his uncle, John Kennedy, announcing

the goal of putting a man on the moon in ten years, One Mind for Research is also called Moonshot for the Mind.

And, in Seattle, every day at the Paul Allen Institute for Brain Science, over a thousand researchers from across the globe access constantly growing data that is free and available to the public.

And, a therapy called DBT has revolutionized treatment for chronically suicidal people. With a usual one-year treatment, suicide attempts have been reduced by half. DBT, dialectical behavior therapy, was developed by Dr. Marsha Linehan at the University of Washington. To view a short and dramatic video where she describes her own depression and to read about the therapy, google Marsha Linehan New York Times.

Aren't there a lot of famous people who've suffered from serious depression?

Yes. Many highly successful, productive and creative people have had depression—almost to the point of being able to say that being a little crazy may be an advantage to those, for example, with high work loads and demanding situations. In retrospect, that seemed true in my career. Here's a list I've compiled of famous people who've suffered from depression.

A	Woody Allen, Alan Alda's mother
B	Art Buchwald, Beethoven, Marlon Brando
C	Winston Churchill, Johnny Carson, Judy Collins
D	John Denver, Patty Duke
F	William Faulkner
G	Tipper Gore, Woody Guthrie's mother
H	Ernest Hemingway
J	Billy Joel
K	Larry King
L	Abraham Lincoln
M	Mozart, Michelangelo
N	Issac Newton
P	Jane Pauley
S	Brooke Shields, Ted Sorensen's mother
T	Mark Twain
V	Kurt Vonnegut
W	Mike Wallace

Missing: E, I, O, Q, R, U, X, Y, Z.

What can I do to help?

You can help curb the severe shortage of brain tissue for research by donating your brain. “Because of the shortage, pharmaceutical companies are pulling huge amounts of funding from brain research,” Dr. Jill Bolte Taylor reported in her 2012 presentation at NAMI. The more brains available, the sooner cures will be found. As a bonus, one brain can be used in multiple research projects.

Brain Bank advocates ask, “Why would you burn or bury anything that could help others?”

For information, visit the Harvard Brain Tissue Resource Center at www.brainbank.mclean.org or call 800-BRAIN-BANK.

Bolte quips, “So, you always wanted to go to Harvard ... here’s your chance.”

How does stress affect mental illness?

Stress has a double whammy on the brain as it not only increases brain cell deaths but reduces brain cell births.

How are diagnoses made?

For years, the DSM has been the standard, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, published by the American Psychiatric Association.

However, the National Institute for Mental Health, NIMH, is working on a “ ... completely different system of diagnosis and it’s expected to be a revolution,” according to NIMH’s director, Dr. Thomas Insel, speaking at the 2012 NAMI convention.

The greater delineation and definition of the many faces of mental illness will surely aid the search for cures—and that’s another good reason for hope.