
This talk was given to the Minister of Health and some of the members of the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia at Mental Health Week breakfast at Empress Hotel, Victoria, BC, on Friday, May 2, 1997. Sponsored by Canadian Mental Health Association, BC Branch.

My name is Ingrid Olson Mercer and I am a person with a mental illness. This should not be immediately obvious to you, because mental illness is generally an invisible disability. The advantage of that is that I can pass for normal, at least on my good days. The disadvantage is that mental illness can become a shameful secret. I'm not mentally ill right now. That's important for you to know. Nobody is psychotic, depressed, anxious or manic all of the time. Mental illness is often intermittent; there are episodes and cycles.

Why tell you about myself like this? First of all, because it helps me to have a positive self-image as a survivor, a person in recovery. I'm not here because I'm a weak person. I can no more be blamed for having a mental illness than I could be blamed for having cancer or a stroke. This is not to say there aren't many things I can do that are good for my mental health. I work hard at preventing another episode of illness.

Another reason for wanting to talk to you is so that other people out there know that having a mental illness doesn't mean your life is over. I have a friend, Maurizio Baldini, who finished law school after being diagnosed with schizophrenia, and went on to practice law. Another friend, Bruce Saunders, runs a weekly movie show at our local psychiatric hospital, where we were both once patients. Bruce demonstrates clearly, week after week, that as well as being creative and intelligent, people with mental illnesses can be reliable, consistent, and follow through on commitments. He's gone 4 years without ever cancelling a show.

Because of my mental illness, I spent a number of years on welfare. This was not because I am lazy or didn't want to work. My psychiatrist said the choice was plain - my job or my sanity. Being on welfare was not fun. It was a struggle not to feel worthless. I found support in the community at Laurel House, a day program of CMHA, where I could paint and draw, do pottery and write and edit a newsletter. I found productive and meaningful ways to spend my days. I got involved in volunteer work and studying, reading everything on mental illness I could get my hands on. The public library was another support.

*Ingrid will be co-presenting with the "Movie Monday Mogul" at *IAPSRS '97 Conference in Vancouver on the topic "Being Out About It"*

Now, a number of years later, I'm proud to say I'm one of the paid staff members at Laurel House, the same program where I was once a client. My employer is of course aware that I have a mental illness. One advantage of this is that I have a job accommodation. Instead of the wheelchair ramp needed for a person with a physical disability, I need a shorter, compressed work day. Some of us need a very quiet environment, some work part-time. We're all different and the way our illnesses affect us is different. For some of us paid employment isn't realistic, it's too stressful, or further in the future. But we all need meaningful things to do with our time and our lives. We need lots of different kinds of support.

It's wonderful to be a care provider. It's great to be a taxpayer again. You probably don't know too many people glad to pay taxes, but in our society a lot of our worth and self-esteem is tied to having a job.

I feel lucky to work in psychiatric rehabilitation. I think I have insights into mental illness that people who haven't been mentally ill themselves have not experienced. The people I serve can identify with me. I believe I offer a model of hope to them. When they get better, maybe they can get jobs too.

I think I also offer the people I serve respect for their knowledge and expertise about their own illnesses. We learn from each other. I continue in my own recovery and rehabilitation while working to help others with theirs. When I help them to recognize their signs of impending breakdown, I learn more about recognizing my own.

I continue my studies of mental illness, and attend workshops, lectures and conferences which enrich me and add to my confidence and competence. CHMA and the system are investing in me. It's increased my self esteem to work in the system where I was once a client.

I'm just one of many people who live with a mental illness. We want to be a part of society, we want to contribute, to lead worthwhile lives.

We need: pills that work
safe places to live
adequate food
something to do
love and friendship
and ways to find meaning for our lives.

Thank you.

Ingrid Olson Mercer
Canadian Mental
Health Association,
Victoria Branch
125 Skinner Street
Victoria, BC
V9A 6X4