

April 2023 – Musings from Lived Experience

*An opinion column by Merle Ginsburg
covering topics related to mental health and substance use*

Is a mental health diagnosis helpful or harmful?

This column is based in part on my living experience with bipolar disorder in addition to input from peers in the mental health and substance use community and information from mental health publications.

Is a mental health diagnosis helpful or harmful?

Benefits of a diagnosis:

- Some people find it comforting to have a diagnosis as it allows them to make sense of some confusing and frightening symptoms. It may shift a sense of self blame that they or their family members have regarding the symptoms being experienced.
- Communication between various health care professionals and the person involved becomes more efficient and focused.
- It gives access to a variety of support groups, treatment programs, financial aid and medications that may not have been available previously.
- It provides assistance for educational and vocational endeavours.
- It gives hope, insight and reduces anxiety of the unknown.
- It decreases isolation and fosters connection with others who have similar experiences.
- It gives family, friends and co-workers the opportunity to learn and better understand the person's illness.
- It gives people a sense of agency over their lives and a chance to share their story.

Drawbacks of a diagnosis:

- A stigma and stereotype is attached to the diagnosis that turns people into abnormal human beings who are seen as crazy, unwell and less than.

- It may impact employment, including certain jobs that require intensive screening, applying for licenses, housing options, relationships and more. These experiences may bring forth feelings of inadequacy, anxiety and despair.
- People may become attached to their diagnosis. It becomes their identity; "I'm bipolar." as opposed to "I have bipolar disorder."
- It fails to explain causes.
- People may feel dismissed by others who choose their diagnosis as a way of explaining their valid emotions e.g. "that's just her bipolar talking. You know how sensitive she is."
- People may be afraid to share the truth about their diagnosis fearing what others might ascribe to it.
- People may become victims of "othering." The "othered" faces exclusion, marginalization and intolerance.

The points listed above are merely a glimpse of the subject matter. This in itself gives way to impassioned and vital conversations, just as it gives way to confrontational and judgemental conversations.

It is important to note that some gains have been made in further understanding and accepting people with mental health and substance use issues that decrease stigma.

This includes:

- The media and an increase in clinical research have helped to shift the conversation and awareness of mental health in a positive direction.
- Literature on trauma that may lead to mental health issues is readily available.
- Celebrities continue to share their struggles with mental health and substance use issues publicly.

Something unexpected happened to me as I was writing this column. I found myself going back and forth from the benefits to the drawbacks of a mental health diagnosis wondering what resonated for me and what didn't as well as what I was thankful for and what I wasn't.

What struck me was that I realized somewhere along the line in some way I became attached to my diagnosis. It comes and goes and spans over a stint of 38 years. On numerous occasions I stood tall and proudly announced "I am not defined by my illness!" I know I'm not. It just feels

complicated right now because it is. Perhaps I'm feeling attached to my diagnosis because it's almost as tall as I am!

On a lighter note -

A friend of mine sent me an email recently. The subject line read "do you like my button?" I opened the attachment and there it was. A white button with black capital letters proudly announcing "I have mental health."

Now that gives way to impassioned and vital conversations!

Think of the possibilities...

Merle Ginsburg has living experience with bipolar disorder. She has been active in the mental health and substance use community as a peer leader, facilitator and coordinator.

Disclaimer: The opinions expressed in this column are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect the views of Consumer Involvement & Initiatives or Vancouver Coastal Health.