

## September 2022 – Musings from Lived Experience

My day was progressing in a predictable fashion on April 30, 2022. In the midst of a menial task I heard on the radio that Naomi Judd had passed away. The cause of death was unknown.

I turned to YouTube for details. According to CNN, Wynonna and Ashley Judd had just issued a press release. It read, "We lost our beautiful mother to the disease of mental illness."

Naomi Judd made the decision to end her life at the age of 76.

My reaction to "the disease of mental illness" was visceral. I was taken aback. I was pacing in my apartment and my heart rate was up. I was excited! This was the first time that I was aware of "the disease of mental illness" being cited as the cause of death.

Naomi Judd had spoken openly about her battle with treatment resistant depression and anxiety. She spoke of her anguish and of her suicidal ideation. She wanted there to be a national conversation about depression. Naomi believed that mental illness was a disease that was life threatening. It stands to reason that her daughters would use the same language in their press release.

Ashley Judd also suffers from depression. During an interview shortly after her mother's death she was quoted as saying, "it's important to distinguish between a loved one and the disease." She went on to say that "the disease lies and it's savage."

We are all too familiar with the phrase "died suddenly" or "cause of death unknown." We might even come across "died by suicide" from time to time. However, a death caused by "the disease of mental illness" is far from commonplace.

Why is this phrase important?

It destigmatizes suicide. There is a belief that victims of suicide are inherently selfish or weak. Using suicide as the cause of death could put blame on the victim and steer clear of the idea that the person was struggling with a mental illness that created the suicidal behaviour.

Accepting mental illness as a disease is destigmatizing. It normalizes the illness and gives hope to the many who know that it's easier for people to hear that they have cancer or heart disease.

Overall, the phrase "disease of mental illness" sheds new light on the profound misconceptions that people have of those who struggle with and suffer from mental illness.

It is important to note that Saturday, Sept. 10, 2022 marks World Suicide Prevention Day. This day has been designated as a means to raise awareness on suicide and suicide prevention worldwide.

Recently, the United States set up a 3-digit Suicide & Crisis Lifeline for those who are in crisis and feeling suicidal. When someone calls, they are immediately transferred to a trained crisis counsellor. Canada is following suit: a 3-digit Mental Health Crisis Line will be launched through calls and text messages effective November 30th, 2023.

Clearly, we are moving in the right direction. Gains have been made in helping the public better understand the intricacies and impact of mental illness through education and dialogue.

Words matter. I believe that Naomi Judd knew that. I admire her courage and candour in referring to mental illness as a disease that is life threatening. I equally admire Wynonna and Ashley's courage for echoing their mother's words in their press release.

My fervent hope is that in the foreseeable future mental illness will be thought of as a disease rather than a disorder or a condition.

*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.*

**If you are in a crisis, please call 911 or 1-800-SUICIDE (1-800-784-2433).**

**You can view additional crisis resources here:**

**<https://www.spotlightonmentalhealth.com/crisis-support-information/>**

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.