

## Narrative

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### Battling Mental Illness – the first step

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I have never really liked to call my 'situation' a mental illness. I felt that it took power away from me by calling it an illness. Besides it is not like other illnesses where you go for a blood test or MRI or CT Scan or Pet scan etc and you get a diagnosis and then you get a medical treatment and are either fine or not fine or somewhere in between. Mental illness works quite differently. For starters it is the illness of the mind and the most debilitating result is that it clouds your judgment and perception, which makes detection and diagnosis quite difficult and in fact can take years. Secondly, mental illness drives people away from you – people you love and really need. It is very hard to deal with relationships – both for the one suffering the illness and the one that is in relationship with the person. Thirdly, it takes away your independence – you don't feel like you can trust yourself, your own mind. And you are constantly struggling to find yourself in your illness. In most physical illnesses you are generally aware of your reality and yourself. In mental illness you are constantly trying to understand if your actions are your own or that of your mental illness – where does your mental illness end where do you begin? What actions are products of your mental illness and what actions are just basic human flaws? Your mind is hell.

Next is the problem of treatment - it takes a long time and a method of trial and error to really find what treatment works for you and then the treatment itself can take a long time. Finally, the hopelessness - since human beings are social animals, creatures of mind, emotions and intelligence, mental illness cripples you and your social life in such a manner that many a times you wonder why bother with this life – you lose all hopes to live, there is no light beyond the tunnel.

Apart from these is the stigma itself. I want to focus for now on 'I' (by this 'I' I mean not just me but I am referring to the identity of the person suffering mental illness) – Who am I? Am I the person suffering through mental illness? Am I the mental illness? Am I the person who I am when I am not going through mental illness? Or am I all of this or none of this? Actually I am quite tired of the 'I' question, quite tired of finding and defining this 'I'. Yet all human interactions and human life as it were revolves around the 'I' – the pronoun I have come to dislike the most. Just to be clear – I don't hate me but I just hate all definitions and explanations of 'I'.

I read a lot on this subject especially things written by others suffering from mental illness. And a common dialogue is 'I am not my mental illness' or 'I am more than my mental illness'. I could relate to it completely. I go through the same thought process in my head especially while interacting with others who know of my mental illness and I usually prefer to isolate myself and really not interact with anyone.

But after months of this dialogue, I have a newer understanding of me. I have a new dialogue - I am my mental illness and I am also the person I was before my mental illness. I am that person who is screaming in the middle of an anxiety attack, I am that listless person sleeping on the bed, not able to get up all day in the middle of a depressive episode. I am that person who is intelligent and owner of production company, I am that person with a weird but great sense of humor, I am that person who is calm and 'normal' between two depressive episodes, I am that person who I was before the onset of this illness and I am that person that is healing. I am also that person who is struggling everyday, falling and getting up again. And I love all of me – the one that is strong, the one that is weak, the one that drowns in self pity, the one that gets up in resilience. I am my mental illness and I am a lot more.

And then I reached a newer dialogue - human personality is not dualistic and there is no dichotomy between 'I' and the 'my mental illness'. Humans and more specifically human personality is quite complex. We are not linear facebook timelines. Our lives are not a series of unconnected or even connected events. We are a mish-mash of our experiences, thoughts, feelings and emotions. Our qualities are not adjectives divided between goodness and flaws or functional and mental illness. My MI is as much a part me of as anything else. It has shaped who I am today as much anything else. And if I love me today then I love all of me. Experience of all kind has helped shaped who I am today and I love me, so accept and love all of them even those that were painful. And I love my mental illness too – I don't like it but I love it because it is a part of me.

I have learnt a lot from the teachings of Thich Nhat Hanh, Albus Dumbledore and many Buddhist teachers – they have helped me a lot especially with understanding 'I'. You are not your thoughts, you are not your feelings, you are not your body, you are not your mind – you are all of them and yet none of them. And so it is with my illness – I am not it, it is me and I am it and it is not me. What I take away from this then is that the journey to healing – healing, not curing - is through acceptance. Unconditional acceptance and loving of all of you is what I do.

My mental illness is not my enemy, I don't hate it. It is like a new unruly pet that you have to train. And in love and acceptance and nurturing and training I have found the first step to healing.

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