Mental Illness vs. Physical Illness - Why Do We Perceive so Differently?

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Webster’s New World College Dictionary defines an illness as, “The condition of being ill, or in poor health; sickness, disease.” Note that the definition does not distinguish between mental or physical. Yet, still too often, we consider mental illnesses differently than physical illnesses. Why is that?

Part of the answer is that physical illnesses can generally be identified and measured. There are clear symptoms doctors are able to diagnose. Mental illnesses, on the other hand, are generally diagnosed by behavioral traits. There aren’t consistent physical measurements that are readily identifiable, which often leads us to blaming the person living with the illness for not getting well. Believe it or not, individuals living with mental illness all too often embrace the blame for their condition. You rarely (if ever) see that in people with physical illnesses.

Mental illnesses are a result of a disruption to the normal function of the brain, and that’s what makes them so hard to identify. The brain is one of the most important components of the body. We need to treat illnesses of the brain the same as we treat any other physical illness. Just like any other disease, there are varying ranges for the severity of a mental illness and treatment options. There are no cookie cutter solutions out there for these complicated diseases.

Our society has told us that people need to be stronger, they should be able to get past their problems and if they can’t, it’s a sign of mental weakness. That’s why it’s so easy to think of those living with mental illnesses differently. But that’s the wrong line of thinking. It’s time we start treating people living with mental and physical illnesses in the same manner.

Finally, one of the most important things to remember is this: not one person has chosen to live with a mental illness; it is not their fault.

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