

OPINION

The Miserable Catch 22 of Mental Illness

Millions of Americans are suffering

BY JILL RICHARDSON

I'm depressed.

I've dealt with mental health issues for decades now. Nothing fancy or interesting like multiple personalities or hallucinations. Just run-of-the-mill boring ones — good old depression and anxiety, and maybe some undiagnosed PTSD to go with it.

Mental illness has a stigma, but most sufferers are like me. Boring. Struggling. Outwardly pretty normal. Not a threat to society. Sometimes we even push our way through work, relationships, raising kids, or — in my case — graduate school.

Lately, I've been splitting my time between hating myself and working on my thesis.

It's kind of odd to go back and forth between reading academic

journal articles like a functional grown-up and curling up in the fetal position in bed like a child. If you saw me in public, you'd never know anything was wrong.

The bigger problem, for those of us who suffer, is the lack of a safety net. If you have a family who can support you and help you, great. But a lot of folks with mental illness get here because our families were dysfunctional in the first place.

There are cases where families all heal together, and it works out in the end. The alcoholic in the mix stops drinking, everyone goes to the appropriate therapy, 12-step program, or both, and the family comes together.

But that's not always the case. Sometimes the problems can't be fixed. Sometimes, rather than being your support system, your family is your problem. What then?

Well, you have to work a full-time job just like everyone else, if you're lucky enough to have one. You have to find a therapist, and

go every week — and pay your bills, do your dishes, and cook your meals just like everyone else.

Doing all of that stuff while depressed isn't easy. It's no easier than trying to do all of those things with the flu — by yourself, without help.

Even with Obamacare's improvements to mental health coverage, getting care isn't always easy or affordable.

In the past two years, I've tried five different therapists without luck. Four were covered by my insurance, and for the last one I forked over \$75 cash just to talk to a woman who didn't help for an hour.

I've had good psychotherapists before. I believe in therapy. But it's exhausting to go through the process of finding a therapist, getting a referral, making the appointment, and then pouring your heart out to someone you barely know just to find out they actually aren't a good fit for you.

And what are the other options?

If you can afford it, you could go to a psychiatrist to try antidepressants, or try more therapists

at a time. For the suicidal, there's hospitalization. For the long-term debilitated, there's Social Security disability. (Not that it really pays enough to live on, nor does it address the actual problem.)

There's a catch-22 element to the problem.

I feel unable to do what I'm supposed to in my life because of anxiety and depression, and I'm anxious and depressed about what I have to do in my life. I'm panicked about making a mistake, so I become paralyzed with fear and make lots of mistakes.

And if your response is, "That's not rational," well... yeah. That's why they call it mental illness.

I don't know what the answer is, but I know the status quo is not okay. Millions of Americans are suffering, and sometimes your very problem, mental illness, makes it harder for you to reach out for the help you need.

OtherWords columnist Jill Richardson is the author of *Recipe for America: Why Our Food System Is Broken and What We Can Do to Fix It*. *OtherWords.org*.



Books to Reflect Our Culture and Experience

A summer reading list for kids

BY MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN

Do your children love the books on their summer reading lists? Are your children reading about diverse cultures and books that reflect their experience or history? Children of color are now a majority of all public school students and will soon be a majority of all children in America yet children's books and the publishing industry have failed to keep up with the rainbow of our children's faces and cultures and needs.

Every summer our Children's Defense Fund Freedom Schools curriculum is focused on a superb collection of diverse books that reflect children's own images and a wide variety of cultures and experiences. For some children it's the first time they've seen books with characters who look like them. For others the storylines draw them in, teach them about moments in history they may not have studied in school, and allow them to fall in love with reading in a way they've never experienced.

Children of color need to be

able to see themselves in the books they read. Just as importantly, all children need to be exposed to a wide range of books that reflect the true diversity of our nation and world as they really are.

At a recent panel discussion before nearly 2,000 college students preparing to fan out across the country to teach in this summer's CDF Freedom Schools programs, a distinguished group of children's book authors and illustrators spoke about their work and what guides them in creating books children will love to read. Often it's because they are creating the books they would have loved to see themselves when they were younger.

Doreen Rappaport writes fiction and nonfiction that celebrate diverse histories and biographies like her Caldecott Medal winner *Martin's Big Words: The Life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.* illustrated by Bryan Collier. Rappaport became an activist in the Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi and heard stories she had never learned or read in the classroom. "There were other movements that came along, and I began to explore and think about all the distortions of the stories about

Native Americans. And then there was the Latino movement and the grape boycott led by [Cesar] Chavez, where people all over the United States stopped eating grapes and we banded together. So for me, telling these stories is a way of finding myself back in history and also correcting all the distortions that I learned as a kid and filling in the pieces of the real story of the United States."

Author and illustrator Don Brown started out on the very same hunt as Rappaport: "I had two little girls, and I wanted to read to them stories about real women who were brave and heroic. I couldn't find books like that." He too decided to write his own, and has since written more than two dozen books on famous and less well known historical figures and events. His latest graphic nonfiction book, *Drowned City*, is about Hurricane Katrina.

Poet and author Carole Boston Weatherford approaches history from another angle: Many of her books are based on historical events spanning the African American experience from slavery through the Civil Rights Movement, and she said children are often amazed to learn the stories she writes about are true: "It never fails, one of the first questions is, 'Did that really happen?'"

Well, you know, that's exactly the reaction that I want from the kids — because they can't fathom that some of the inhumanities and injustices that were part of legalized segregation and part of America's history of institutionalized racism really happened."

Rita Williams-Garcia has won numerous awards for her historical fiction trilogy that begins with the Newbery Honor novel *One Crazy Summer* — she began telling stories that were very deliberately not historical. She was writing contemporary fiction about girls like herself whom she had never seen in novels, and the girls in her audience responded with an immediate hunger for more.

When Jason Reynolds, the author of *When I Was the Greatest*, *The Boy in the Black Suit*, and *All American Boys*, was in school no one ever showed him books that featured his voice or story, and so he didn't like to read at all. He now very deliberately writes books for other young people: "Right now what we see in our communities, we see that the young people of color are hyper-visible, yet terribly invisible at the same time, and that puts them in a really complicated spot, and I think all I really want to do is say, 'I see you.'"

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