

Real People, Real Stories

Jewish institutions have a powerful role to play in combating mental illness through creating an atmosphere of inclusion and supportive community. Some congregations run support groups for families where a member has a serious mental illness like schizophrenia. Others provide programs like Rosh Hodesh groups and youth groups in which the focus is on promoting confidence, self assertion and social skills—all of which contribute to prevention and easing of symptoms of eating disorders in teens. Still others provide panel discussions with mental health practitioners who offer information and diminish prejudices, or provide programs during services or adult education sessions in which people who are living with mental illness share their journeys and contribute their wisdom and experience to inspire others and reduce stigma.

Jewish institutions are well-positioned to help real people facing mental illness. Real people include the teen whose youth group leader recognizes the signs of an eating disorder and is able to alert those who can help reach out to her and her family. Real people include the Past President of a congregation who has experienced depression after being forced into retirement, and is visited in the hospital by members of his synagogue leadership and offered positions of leadership when he is ready to resume his full participation. Real people include the young mother struggling with post partum depression who is referred to professional help by the Director of the Early Childhood program and offered support through a parent and infant group. Real people include the widow who speaks to the rabbi about her suicidal thoughts and hopelessness after the rabbi spoke in a sermon about the Biblical Naomi's depression and bitterness, and finds quiet accompaniment and a welcoming community to help her find her way back to hope and pleasure.

We know that Jewish institutions can help those with mental illness. A.G., a congregant at a Reform synagogue, shared with us her inspiring story, which illustrates the important role our communities can play.

I have a mental illness. I have bi-polar disorder. Not long ago, I was approached to write an essay that would address how I experienced inclusion in my synagogue as a person who has a mental illness. It is as follows:

Inclusion has always permeated my entire relationship with my temple. My very first conversation with a local rabbi was about inclusion. Twenty-one years ago, I was faced with a dilemma. How could my ten-year-old son become a Bar Mitzvah if as a single working parent I could barely pay the rent, no less pay dues? I posed that question to the rabbi. Her reply was simple. "Just because you are poor is not a reason that should prevent you from being part of a Jewish community." And so it began.

My son attended Hebrew school and I started to go to the Saturday morning Sabbath service held in the chapel. Years of social isolation began to fade, as I was welcomed into the congregation, a devoted group of fifty to one hundred Jews that eventually became an extended family. It was there that I reconnected with a sense of spirituality.

In the summer of 1993, after years of struggling with an undiagnosed mental illness, I became suicidal and I had to be hospitalized. Saturday mornings at my synagogue had become an important touchstone for me. The service became a piece of my recovery. Every Saturday morning at 11:45, I knew my name was being announced during Mi Shebeirach. I received get-well cards, had a "pen pal" and spoke with the rabbi every Sabbath afternoon. Although we were separated by hundreds of miles for a month, I was still included in the life of my synagogue as if I was physically present. It was a powerful relationship. I was released from the hospital on Erev Rosh Hashanah. The next day I celebrated the New Year at synagogue fully aware that it was not just a new year, but also the start of a healthy healing time of my life.

In January 1994, my son became a Bar Mitzvah. The service was held in the chapel where four generations of my family gathered as well as friends and my extended family, the congregation. The ceremony was all I hoped it would be and the potluck luncheon that followed was the generous gift of the congregation. Initially, I felt ashamed that I lacked the means to throw a big celebration. However, many congregants expressed their gratitude that they played a part in making the day special for us. Once again I felt that great sense of inclusion.

After two years of study with a group of adults, 2001 became the year I experienced my own Bat Mitzvah. It was a rite that was not offered to me when I was thirteen. Becoming a Bat Mitzvah was a milestone in my life and it marked another step in my full inclusion in the Jewish community.

It's been over twenty-one years since I became a congregant at that synagogue. Today, I continue to attend Saturday morning services and I have become a regular at the study preceding the service. I share my views and it is frequently as a person who happens to have a mental illness. There is no stigma here. As always, my synagogue embraces me fully. Here is a place of total inclusion.

Today I am very grateful that for many years now, with therapy and medication, I have led a fully satisfying life which includes my loving family, a group of devoted friends, an active social life, my graduation from college, my own successful business and of course a strong connection with my Jewish community.

--A.G. (congregant of a URJ synagogue)