

A few years back, while I was studying to become a geriatric nurse, we talked about the subject of mental illness in class. This was supposed to be quite a big part of our curriculum as the nursing home that we all worked in also had a psychiatric unit, housing patients with various forms and degrees of mental illness. I was excited to be able to learn more about something that I was already passionate about and I was glad that we would be having lessons about the subject in class. During the first lesson the teacher handed out a sheet of paper which was supposed to have definitions and symptoms of a few of the most common mental disorders on it. It is safe to say that I was quite shocked when I read it. It read something roughly like the following:

- Depression: When someone is feeling a bit low or sad
- Anxiety: When someone is feeling nervous
- Bipolar Disorder: When someone has a lot of ups and downs
- Schizophrenia: When someone has hallucinations

Now, not only does that leave out a multitude of other mental disorders that should have been mentioned. It also generalises and downplays the severity of those disorders to a point where, reading it as a person who has experienced mental illness first hand it is quite frankly infuriating. Now as much as I wanted to give my teacher the benefit of the doubt, thinking he may just not be educated enough to accurately teach on the subject, it turned out that he actually was a trained psychiatrist, which just made me even angrier.

So what happens when we teach and/or spread information like this? Well first of all, by doing this you are essentially invalidating and downplaying the experiences and the trauma of those people who live with an actual mental illness. Mental disorders are so much more serious and complex than can be put into one sentence. They are also highly subjective, meaning that certain people may experience different symptoms than others. Regardless of that however, a mental illness is something that is very scary. It's confusing, it's debilitating – it's a lot more than just being a bit like this or that. It can have serious effects on a person's well-being. It ruins relationships, jobs, ambitions and so much more.

If you are saying and teaching something like "Depression being a bit sad or down sometimes" you are discrediting every single person that has ever lived with this condition. And for a person suffering from mental illness, this is infuriating.

Another thing this ultimately leads to is the misuse of descriptors such as "depressed" or "anxious". All of a sudden every person you know is depressed. Everyone's got anxiety and surely everyone's got OCD as well because they organise their skittles by colour. Our society is becoming one big mental illness and as much as I would like to put that down to lack of knowledge or education, a lot of it is just sheer ignorance. And it's in no way fair on those who actually do suffer every single day. Those who have to live with debilitating mental disorders and have to fight their hardest just to get through some days.

When I see people say that they have social anxiety when they may in fact just not want to go out or are just a bit awkward, it makes my blood boil. I'd love to scream at them, I'd love to make them live one day of my life and see how they like their social anxiety then. Because it's not just not wanting to go out, or feeling a little awkward.

It's knowing every public toilet in a 2 mile radius because you know your IBS will act up in public. It's throwing up before meetings. It's cancelling plans last minute because you got so overwhelmed. It's never making phone calls, regardless of how important they may be. And never answering the phone and then pretending that you were out of signal, so people would text you instead. It's excessive sweating, shaking and hiding in toilets to escape social events. It's not an aesthetic, it's not something quirky you can say to get some lad to like you better.

*Mental illness ruins lives. Daily.*

So please, unless you have experienced mental illness first hand, refrain from using those descriptors for yourself. Feeling invalidated and not being taken seriously is one of the worst feelings a person can go through. You are not doing anyone a favour by using those words so liberally and you're most certainly not funny or quirky. All you are doing is effectively adding to the already existing stigma that surrounds mental illness. Mentally ill people struggle enough as it is, you don't have to take their validity away by glamorising life threatening disorders. It's not cool.

Please be mindful and think about what you say about yourself and others in the future.