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**Individual  
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*A newsletter for the Activity Center Clients by the Activity Center Clients!*

## **Stigma by Debbie Safe**

One of the most troubling and painful aspects of having a mental illness is coping with the stigma. Despite the many groups that have evolved in recent years to fight stigma – NAMI, clubhouses, consumer movements, peer specialists – it remains an ongoing challenge. Stigma is a very real problem for people who have a mental illness and it often produces feelings of shame, anger, low self-esteem, and powerlessness. It can undermine the recovery process itself.

So many of our consumers have endured countless losses as a result of their illness. Having spent time in institutional settings,

particularly at the onset of their symptoms, they initially lose their personal freedom, their decision making ability, and independence. Their care is relegated to the hospital staff where they are instructed as to when they can eat, bathe, and what time they must go to sleep at night. Mental health consumers describe the loss of employment, friends, their home or apartment, and sometimes even family support. Labeled with a diagnosis, they often lose sight of what they are capable of doing and doubt their own ability to move towards recovery. *This happens, despite the fact that most of them worked and lived independently prior to the onset of the illness.* At this

point, any sense of independence or success has long since vanished and they may feel that they have no real control over their lives.

Add to this the impact of stigma attached to having a mental illness and consumers recognize the enormous challenges they face. In this issue consumers will address stigma and the impact it has on their lives as they attempt to move forward. On a personal note I am consistently in awe of the courage and resiliency of our clients.

**“Labeled with a diagnosis, they often lose sight of what they are capable of doing and doubt their own ability to move towards recovery.”**

## **Special Acknowledgement by Debbie Safe**

*A very special recognition to Lora DiBiase for her hard work and dedication to the Activity Center Connections. Without Lora this newsletter would not have been possible. Thank you Lora!*

## The Stigma of having a Mental Illness by David Barg



*(Stig`ma – A mark of disgrace or infamy; a stain or reproach, as on one's reputation.)*

**“Upon seeing me roaming ‘unsupervised’ he quickly gathered his young children and ushered them into the house.”**

**(Stig`ma** – A mark of disgrace or infamy; a stain or reproach, as on one's reputation.)

I really hate the term ‘Mental Illness. Friendlier than ‘Brain Disorder’ I reason but quite as descriptive as Bi-Polar Disease (my own personal affliction). I would rather it go something like the following:

*“I have this condition which sometimes causes my moods to become exaggerated.”*

The only problem with the above is that there is no check box on the form which includes this as an option.

As I have lived with a mental illness most of my adult life, I suppose I have developed some expertise in exactly how the stigma associated with having a mental illness has affected me and my loved ones. Three categories come to mind. The perception of being:

- A danger to society
- Simple, dim witted, and/or childlike
- Contagious; capable of infecting others

One of the basic principles of the human condition maintains that at the root of all we fear is a lack of knowledge. Simply, we

fear that which we do not understand. Think about prejudice for example. Studies confirm time and again that those most likely to hold disparaging views of any particular social group have never even met a member of that group. Unfortunately when it comes to misunderstood segments of the population folks suffering from a mental illness are right up there with individuals who have filed eye witness sightings of the Loch Ness Monster. From where do these misconceptions arise? Let us examine from where the *Danger to Society* stigma arises.

Consider the plethora of movies which make the rounds on our televisions each Halloween. The knife, ax, chainsaw, wielding antagonist we discover is either:

- @ An escaped mental patient (**o’ that I ever was hospitalized**)
- @ Described as a split personality-schizophrenic (**the movie Psycho**)
- @ Discovered to have an ‘undisclosed history of mental illnesses. (**Please do not tell anyone of my condition**)
- @ Transformed by

experimental medication (**Think Dr. Jekyll & Mr. Hyde – then imagine standing behind me at the prescription counter**)

Not exactly your basic documentaries, are they? Taking this a step further, what reaction might you expect from your average citizen when they discover that you are a card carrying member of the above group?

### **Danger to Society?**

I am reminded of my first full day in Kadima's Ravitz Home. From the front yard I waved a simple “hello” to my new neighbor. Upon seeing me roaming ‘unsupervised’ he quickly gathered his young children and ushered them into the house. I could practically smell his fear. Not only did he communicate volumes by his actions, but he was passing the ‘stigma’ onto the next generation.

### **Simple, dim-witted, and/or childlike?**

Everyone understands that, like the general population, folks in Kadima vary in education, training and experience. People are surprised to discover that some of us have advanced degrees. Why?

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## Stigma against Me by Lora DiBiase

### ***“I’ll take ‘What’s not contagious?’ for \$2000, Alex.”***

I have always thought this when people go running for the hills when they find out I have a mental illness. Thinking about all the stigma that I have faced for this article brings me back to 12 years ago when I had just gotten out of my last two month stay in a psychiatric ward. It was nine days before my junior year of high school would be over. I was going around to all my friends that I had made during my two years at Milford High School, knowing it would be my last year there. I had moved into a group home and it was in a different school district. (MORC was kind enough to pay someone to transport me to Milford High School for those nine days.) Well anyways, I went around and had all my friends sign my yearbook or so I thought they were my friends.

Every one of them wrote something along the line as “Sorry, you missed a lot. Why did you have to go psycho?” or “It’s not you but I think we should stop hanging out.” The one that hurt me the most was my best friend. Even though I no longer have the yearbook, 12 years later I still remember what

she wrote like it was yesterday – “Dear Vev, I don’t think we should hang out anymore. It’s not you, It’s my mom. She doesn’t want me to hang out with people like you.” I was so hurt by all of this I said f-you to the school and threw out the yearbook and started over at the new school.

Even at the new school, I faced stigma from my fellow classmates. Just because they knew of my living situation. The lady who ran the group home out of her house has a daughter my age that also went to the same school. She was very popular and had many friends. I can remember walking down the hallways on my first day at a brand new school my senior year and hearing “There’s that crazy person that lives with Amy.” Although it didn’t really bother me too much, I tried using Amy’s popularity to make some friends – to no avail. I even tried making friends with a new guy that transferred to the school in the middle of the school year. I tried making friends before he could hear all the rumors about me. It was working so well for a few weeks until he heard them and he went running for the hills – so to speak.

So to protect myself from future hurt I tried out a theory, a theory that has worked for the last ten years quite well – don’t tell anyone about having a mental illness until they at least have known me for six months and they know the true me. Now I am happy to report – I have made a lot of friends who DON’T care that I have Bi-Polar or even Schizophrenia. As a matter of fact when they find out, I’m like the new toy that everyone wants. They ask me tons of questions like “Why didn’t you tell us about it?” When I tell them why they reply “We’re not like that.” That is when I truly know I have the best friends in the world.



***“I don’t think we should hang out any more. It’s not you. It’s my mom. She doesn’t want me to hang out with people like you.”***

*“That is when I truly know I have the best friends in the world.”*

## Jill's Story by Jill R.

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***“I do my best to fit in to this already crazy world. I truly feel that those of us at Kadima are the lucky ones.”***

It's flu season so be sure to wash your hands a lot; but don't feel that you can catch mental illness the same way. I've had a mental illness for a long time and I'm probably always going to have some form of it. The symptoms of mental illness can appear at any time. It can happen to anyone at any age or stage in life.

When someone has a broken leg, you can see it; that person will be wearing a cast and the pain of a broken leg is visible. Other people will see this, feel sorry for them and reach out to help them. But mental illness is a hidden disease. Some may hear voices, have hallucinations or paranoid thoughts. The pain is not

always visible. Because of this some feel that the person can just snap out of it.

I'm very proud of how far I have come with understanding and dealing with my illness. But my family doesn't always see it that way. Sometimes they are scared to be open with me and they will hide things from me. Their fear is that if they tell me certain things that it might upset me and I will end back in the psych ward. Some times when I am at a family gathering, I feel like they are on guard to make sure that the “mental person” doesn't embarrass them or better yet, embarrass anyone else.

Recently, I made a new friend who I met at an art class. We talked for a long

time and she had no idea that I had a mental illness. She asked me where I lived and, being proud of my living situation, I told her about Kadima. She came over to the house and met my roommates. I didn't feel that I had to hide anything so I ended up telling her about my mental illness and that my diagnosis was Borderline Personality Disorder. She laughed and asked if the next time she saw me I might not be who I was that day. We both laughed even though I didn't know if she was sincere.

Treat me and my mental illness like the flu. I take medications and get rest when I need it. I do my best to fit in to this already crazy world. I truly feel that those of us at Kadima are the lucky ones.

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## Interview with John R.

Debbie: “Can you describe the impact of stigma in your life?”

John: “The impact of stigma is very hurtful. It is unfortunate that there are ignorant people in society that don't know what I am going through. For example, in the early 1990's, I was attending religious services at an Evangelical Presbyterian church. The pastor rarely talked to me after learning that I struggle

with depression. He perceived everything in life from a religious standpoint and had no recognition that my mental illness was actually caused by a chemical imbalance in my brain. I felt as if he had the attitude that I should be able to “get over it.” This was especially hurtful as I would expect places of worship to be more accepting. Another example is something that happened at a Coney Island

restaurant that I often went to. One day when I was there, the manager approached me about a problem that occurred in the restroom. Someone had taken a large amount of paper towel and stuffed it in the toilet. The manager just assumed that because I have a mental illness I must be the culprit. When he accused me I became furious and explained to him that I would never do anything like that.

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***“The impact of stigma is very hurtful.”***

## The Stigma of having a Mental Illness by David Barg

*Continued from page 2.*

They sit wide eyed when members' exhibit specialized knowledge in specific areas. Any number of 'Projects' created in what I laughingly call Arts & Crafts, would be at home in a major exhibition ... Is it our clothing which belies our brains? Hey, look we are not all prodigies. We also make things like Outstanding Friends. Yet, why should our conditions make a surprise of our accomplishments?

Take note. Members of Kadima are an Adult Population. It irks me when a member introduces someone as their girlfriend or boyfriend and I overhear folks comment on how 'cute' it is that they are coupled up. I am only going to say this once – so listen up! All people (mentally ill or not) are sexual beings. It is a fact of life.

There is not anything you ever saw, heard, or read about of a sexual nature that eludes someone just because they become moody more often than most. It is a crime that we have to be a bit more clever than you. How would you feel if someone made rules about who can visit you in your own room?

Think it is easy getting some privacy when you have six people living in a house? How would your libido be affected if every phone call, every trip to the corner store, even going out in the front yard, were monitored by a stranger! What if the guy 'inspecting' your room uncovers your birth control pills, x-rated movies, or condom stash? Don't fool yourselves. Maybe we do it better, or at least appreciate it more, because we have to work harder for it.

### ***Contagious; capable of infecting others?***

You cannot catch a mental illness (People used to think of cancer in this manner.) If you shy away from shaking our hands, who is the one with a problem? If you let my nieces, nephew, grandkids, etc. play with me they will not lose any sensibilities. They might have fun or even learn a thing or two about accepting differences in people. Nuff said.

In the end, we are just like you. Maybe we could avoid some of our 'moodiness' if you left the 'stigma' baggage at the door. Thanks.

***“You cannot catch a mental illness.”***

### **Some Interesting Facts: The following was taken from the Canadian Mental Health Association**

***People with mental illness are violent and dangerous.*** *The truth is that, as a group, mentally ill people are no more violent than any other group. In fact they are more likely to be victims of violence than to be violent themselves*

***People with mental illness are poor and /or less intelligent.*** *Many studies show that most mentally ill people have average or above average intelligence. Mental illness, like physical illness can affect anyone regardless of intelligence, social class, or income level.*

***Mental illness is caused by a personal weakness.*** *A mental illness is not a character flaw. It is an illness and has nothing to do with being weak or lacking will power. Although people with mental illness can play a big part in their own recovery, they did not choose to become ill, and they are not lazy because they cannot just “snap out of it.”*

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**(COMING SOON)**

## **Interview with John R. Continued**

*Continued from page 4.*

But I couldn't convince him.

Stigma comes not only from those who are not educated about mental illness but those who wrongfully choose not to learn about it.”

## **Jill's Story Continued**

*Continued from page 4.*

We are getting the help we need and learning more about our illness. I am not ashamed; I am just me. I hope that people can like me for and what I stand for. My illness doesn't define me. I have much more to give

than yesterday's old news.

## Acknowledging Each Other

Sue: I want to thank David for his imaginative activities.

Helen: I want to thank Debbie for making every minute count while we're here.

Alice: I want to thank Ronit for the Shabbat meals.

Doreen: I want to thank Terri for being a friend.

Renee: I want to thank Robert for being who he is.

Orin: I want to thank James, the case coordinator, for being friendly and nice. I really enjoy talking with him about music. I also want to thank Jack for being a wonderful roommate.

James: I want to acknowledge and congratulate Robert for moving into his own place. Keep up the good work.

Glen: I want to thank Dave and Debbie for the activity center.

Mark: I want to thank Kadima staff and clients for being so caring.

Jill: Thanks to David and Debbie for being here for us. I want to thank Dale for being Mr. Fixit. And I want to thank Ronit for making the best chicken in the world.

David: Thanks to Dale for being supportive of anything we ask him to do.

Terri: I would like to thank Jill for bringing in her own materials and teaching the art class.

Joel: Thanks to David and Ronit for being awesome chefs.

Herbert: Thank you for the Shabbat lunch.

Debbie: Special thanks to Jill for teaching the art class; you are doing a great job! Thanks to Terri for jumping right in and being so helpful; we are all so glad you are here. Thanks to David for the Booberator and for keeping us

laughing. Thanks to Michael T. for the incredible "Woody Allen" smile. Thanks to Herb, Glen, Mark, and Blake for taking the garbage out every week – it is much appreciated. Thanks to all of the activity center members who volunteered to work in the snack shop. Thanks to Merrill for stimulating conversation. And thanks to Ronit for making the finest chicken I have had everywhere.

Lora: Thanks to Jill for being a really good friend and soon-to-be good housemate. Thanks to Colleen and Corrine for allowing me to spend the night on weekends to get to know you guys better. Thanks to Nancy for all your help on helping me to understand my student loans. Thanks to Lisa for being a great therapist. Thanks to Sandi for being a good friend and Kadima president!

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