THE CATALYST

Back on the road to recovery

A sudden pothole wrecked my car—and my night. That's how mental illness feels: an abrupt derailment, unlike mental health's routine "maintenance." Self-care helps, but breakdowns need professional repair, time, and often money.

By: Jessica Ward-King | Posted: August 17, 2023

I was driving my car down the street, heading to a movie with a friend, when all of a sudden: WHAM! A pothole. My tire was in there before I could react, and I don't know what it did – bent my alignment or twisted my suspension or something (can you tell I'm no mechanic?) – but the next thing I know, I am stranded by the side of the road and being towed to the shop, facing a very hefty bill and a long process just to make her roadworthy again. And I missed my movie.

I feel like my life with a mental illness is like that sometimes. I can be cruising along just fine when some bump in my path derails my whole journey leaving me miffed, frazzled, phoning for help and not really knowing what is going on, missing the things in life that I enjoy, and facing a long (and often expensive) road to recovery.

Now, if you'll indulge me in sticking with the car metaphor for a while, no amount of oil changes, brake jobs, or filter changes were going to prevent me from hitting that pothole or from my car getting damaged. And that, I propose, is the difference between mental health and mental illness.

Mental health is the general running of my car. I can take care of it – get regular services, change the wipers, fill the reservoirs, change the filters, and keep it clean – or not, and so, the general condition and running of my car can be good or not. Mental health is just like that. We can do the things we need to do to keep ourselves in tip-top condition or neglect our self-care and just barely keep running on fumes.

Mental illness is what happens when something actually goes wrong with my car – it breaks down or gets damaged. Poor maintenance can contribute to things going wrong, to be sure, in both cars and mental health. But sometimes, those (literal or figurative) "bumps in the road" break an axle and send you calling for help and needing care before recovery can happen. They can come out of the blue (like my pothole) or out of a longer, more drawn-out process of becoming worn down (say, wearing out your brakes), but either way, a trip to the professionals for some help is the result.

I mentioned the expense of getting my car fixed by a professional mechanic. Sometimes I can call my dad, or a friend, to come and help me – tweak something, fill a reservoir, change a fuse, that sort of thing. But sometimes, the only way I am going to get my car to run again is to take it to the mechanic. That is sort of frightening and not always accessible – sometimes, I can't afford either the time or the money it will take. Getting help for my mental illness is like that too. It takes time, and, in the case of private psychotherapy and prescription medication, it can have significant costs. And not everyone can afford it.

No metaphor is perfect, and this one, too, cannot be taken too far or too literally, but it can be helpful to think through the differences between mental health and mental illness and how they are connected.

I missed my movie, but my friend picked me up from the shop, and we got takeout and streamed TV instead. Then I dusted off my bike and made it to work the next day – with sore legs, but successfully. Having my car break down wasn't the end of the world, and with some time, money, and effort (which I am privileged to be able to invest), I got my car back on the road. My life with mental illness is like that, too – with the help of friends and family, I keep living life (not without hiccups and disappointments but living it nonetheless!) and eventually end up back on my road to recovery.

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BSc, PhD, *aka the StigmaCrusher*, is a mental health advocate and keynote speaker with a rare blend of academic expertise and lived experience. Equipped with a doctorate in experimental psychology and firsthand knowledge of bipolar disorder, she's both heavily educated and, as she likes to say, heavily medicated. Crazy smart, she's been crushing mental health stigma since 2010.

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