THE CATALYST

See me as a person, not a diagnosis

'You're so brave' can feel diminishing to those living with mental illness. Courage lies not in existing but in choosing to share our stories against stigma.

By: Jessica Ward-King | Posted: February 9, 2023

"You're so brave."

"You're such an inspiration!"

"You're so strong – such a fighter."

We say these things to people living with illness and disability all the time, but have you ever thought about what they might be hearing?

Bravery is defined as "strength in the face of pain or grief". And, perhaps to some people, a disability like mental illness is a very painful thought. But to someone like me who lives it every single day, facing my life's challenges doesn't feel like bravery or courage or even strength – it feels like life. When someone says, "you're so brave" (as they do all the time) all I hear is that to them, my life is pitiful, and I feel diminished and reduced to my diagnosis. It makes me think of an after school special on "never giving up" (remember those cheesy posters from the eighties and nineties with a cat hanging on a rope? Yeah, that.)

But I get the sentiment. First of all, when I tell my story it is difficult to know what to say. I tell a harrowing tale of stigma and illness and people become lost for words. But the sentiment that they are trying to express – I think – is that me telling my story is brave. That owning my story is inspirational. That sharing my story illustrates strength. It is a much different message. It is not me as a person being reduced to a diagnosis, but me as a whole human being, encouraging others to look past the labels in my fight against the stigma of mental illness.

When I tell my story to audiences of strangers, I feel like telling my story is courageous. When I talk about my struggles with trusted friends and family it is really just me, wanting real connection and understanding – and that is vulnerability and trust rather than courage. And from those close relationships I want recognition of me as a person rather than my fight against stigma.

But if you are wondering what you *should* say when someone shares their story of living with their mental disability with you, I would recommend some kind of heartfelt variation of the following:

"Thank-you. Thank-you for sharing your story and helping me to understand a little bit more. Your story inspires me to look at my own biases and stigma surrounding living with illness or disability. It takes bravery to share this story in the face of systemic inequities and discrimination. Thank-you."

It's a nuance, but an important one. Keep on looking past the labels and crushing stigma.

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