



"Why Me?"

There is one question that I think many people with experience of mental illness would ask themselves, and which I myself have asked myself many times. That question is, "why did this happen to me?"

Statistics say 46.6% of New Zealanders will experience mental illness at some point in their lives. We are yet to understand the specifics of why this happens. Does the root of the matter lie in genetics? Life experience? A mixture of the two?

I for one know that, given the choice, I definitely wouldn't have such an illness. I wouldn't wish it on anyone, except maybe to bestow a brief and nonpermanent experience of what it's like.

Imagine that—being able to give the doctor or psychiatrist treating you a firsthand view of what's going on in the inner world of your mind. Well meaning though they may be, it's a fact that a purely academic understanding will never fully encompass what it's like to actually live with a mental illness.

When psychiatrists and other health professionals are dealing with someone experiencing a mental illness, the procedure sort of reminds me of that childhood game *Battleship*. It sometimes seems to be just as hit and miss, and unfortunately the quality of treatment you receive is often dependant on the quality of the questions they ask you.

Perhaps it's a "gift" I'd like to

bestow on those who are too quick to throw aside the many things they have in common with the mentally ill, and focus instead on what makes them different.

I don't even really like the term "mental illness." Many illnesses can be treated or cured; I know that through no fault of my own, I've been diagnosed with something I will most likely be coping with for the rest of my life.

I don't see it as an "illness" as such, more an experience that most people can't relate to. To label it as a lifelong condition with little or no hope of being completely cured is just too depressing.

I have great sympathy for those living with a physical illness, as I'd like to think most people would. Perhaps this is precisely because of the fact it is just that—a physical illness. It's easier to relate to because everyone has a body.

Coping with any mental illness takes a lot of work. You're not taking an antibiotic that will fight an infection without any input from you. In the end when dealing with mental illness, there has to be a point when we shift from asking "why did this happen to me?" to "what can I do about it?"

"Why did this happen to me?" is ultimately a rhetorical question—even if science is able to explain the physical causes of mental illness, it won't be able to tell you why fate chose you to have one.

As for "what can I do about it?" however, you're in luck. There are many things you can do to

help you cope with your condition.

Education would be the most important thing—in many cases you'll be living with an illness in the long term. The more sense you can make of what you're experiencing, the easier it will be to reach the point when you can think about it as just that—an experience.

Importantly, by increasing your understanding of your illness, you improve your ability to articulate your experience to your psychiatrist or other health professional. Being able to play a more active part in your treatment is empowering, which is great in a situation where it's all too easy to feel powerless.

Resources about mental health have never been easier to find; the internet means that information is just a few clicks away. I can attest to the fact that the net, when used wisely, can be a great tool—as long as you remember that this information is a supplement to, not a substitute for, professional advice.

An initiative new to Taranaki is called Turn the Page. Libraries in Taranaki have now increased their range of resources on mental health/illness. You, your family, GPs, indeed anyone can access these resources at no cost.



An important thing to remember is that, though you may think so at first, you're not alone. Many other people have shared their knowledge, and their own answers to the question, "what can I do about it?"

Tony Spencer

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