Mental Health Conversations: Jen Flatt Osborn

Mental Health Conversations

By Livia Peterson

I am introducing a new series — Mental Health Conversations, interviews about mental health and the COVID-19 impact.

Today, I am interviewing Jen Flatt Osborn, a copy and content writer. I met Jen via LinkedIn, as we are both mental health advocates.

Explain your mental health story and treatment.

I was born with mental illness. The statement is controversial, but I believe it. From as far back as when I was 4-years-old, I remember feeling uncomfortable, unsettled, and unnerved just being in my own body. Throughout grade, middle, and high school, it never stopped. In middle school, a group of my friends (whom I always felt different from) were sitting around and a girl was describing each of us.

She was saying things like, "You're always telling jokes" and "You're always studying." When she got to me she said, "You're just weird." There was some nervous laughter and I knew she was right. I never quite fit in anywhere. Always a lone wolf, never wanting to be with groups of people...I do love people but generally enjoy being with them one-on-one. I've learned I have social anxiety as well.

When I was first diagnosed with bipolar and acute anxiety at age 23, I found out mental illness was rampant in my family. And from recent research on us, I found out it goes back for five generations

which is where I stopped looking into it. I learned it was familial and a chemical imbalance so I've never blamed myself.

I've been hospitalized twice, once in my early 20's and the second time fairly recently, and know just how important it is for me to stay on my medication. For me, not for everyone, it has been my life preserver. When I've made the incredibly misguided decision to stop taking them, 5 or 6 times over the years, my condition goes straight into the gutter. It's not pretty.

I've also been in therapy off and on for over three decades. It's been incredibly successful. Recently, my therapist resigned so I'll be be in the search for another one. And you'll have to take my meds out of my cold, dead hands.

Explain your coping strategies.

Besides medication and therapy, if I feel an anxiety attack coming on, I use deep breathing a lot. Also the grounding exercise. They help me focus on the moment instead of catastrophizing the future or ruminating on the past -- both things I have gold medals in. Depression and mania are different animals for me and it's difficult to grab on to something that will help other than therapy and meds. But I'll never stop trying.

Explain how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted your mental health.

I feel guilty for saying this, but being quarantined barely affected me at all. I'm home 95% of the time anyway so it was actually kind of nice thinking the rest of us were in one place. It was comforting. Having said that, there were times when I felt claustrophobic because I couldn't get out which was definitely a mental thing.

The biggest negative impact it had on me was the worry it caused. Over my family, strangers, and especially for my daughter. I would cry it out, which is good for me, and try to move on.

I never had a major breakdown but did battle through a couple of anxiety attacks and used the coping strategies I mentioned above. I also reached out to my family and to mental health groups/friends I have online who were extremely supportive. Arms are for reaching and if I'm falling, I use them.

Explain how telemedicine impacted your mental health treatment.

In a nutshell, it sucks. I don't like it when I have to use it when I go in to my doctor's office or when I'm at home. If we can't see an actual doctor when we go to see an actual doctor, something's wrong. (And boy is it with our mental health system.)

Body language, facial expressions, quiet responses and sounds we make... All are lost when we're reduced to speaking to someone on a screen. It's impersonal, difficult, and ridiculous. Of course, having the choice of telemedicine or not seeing anyone at all, I'll choose speaking through cyber-space every time. Any help helps.

Explain why it's important to eliminate the mental health stigma.

This is a doozy. If those of us with mental illness are silent, what will change? We need more beds, funding, education, and medical professionals. We'd not only be doing nothing for ourselves, but who would stand up for those who can't or won't speak up for themselves? We'd digress. And I don't want to be shipped off and put in a cage.

If we don't clang the cymbal and stomp our feet, society and the government aren't going to care. They barely do now. Talking about it helps everyone...The person who has mental illness but feels ashamed, the one who is about to take their own life, Congress, our families, those who have lost someone to suicide, and people who have no clue about what having it is like.

We have a responsibility to talk about it. And we must. Not. Stop.