

We need to be more equipped to combat mental illness

In a week where we have lost two celebrities to suicide, I want to write about suicide, but I also don't want to write about suicide.

I see people offering on social media to be there for their friends who are in crisis, and I think...well, yes, we could take better care of one another. Absolutely, we could—and should—try to do that.

But it's also important to recognize mental illness for what it is and acknowledge that there is no easy solution. It's not always something a person can navigate even with a strong, wonderful family and compassionate friends. It often requires professional help and medication and sometimes switching to different professional help and different medications multiple times.

Sometimes that's still not enough. And we lose people we love.

I don't mean to sound negative or discouraging. And I am absolutely not an expert on this. In fact, I know very little. But I think it's important to recognize the severity of mental illness.

When I see posts encouraging people who are depressed to reach out or telling us we need to reach out to people who are depressed, I agree that that is important. But I also feel as if it makes it sound similar to reaching out to remind a friend to schedule a mammogram.

A friend said to me this week that when someone loses a battle to cancer or heart disease, their loved ones don't sit there wishing they had done more. Mental illness is a disease. We must, must see it that way. As much as we want there to be an easy fix, something within our control, we cannot view mental illness as something that can be solved with communication or kindness or love.

Mental illness is complicated. You might not be the right person to reach out or you might reach out at the wrong time. You might not know where to direct your loved

one next. Do you have any idea how hard it is to find a therapist who takes insurance? To see one quickly? To get answers? To find a medication that works? The whole mental health system in this country is confusing and mysterious to navigate. We need to be more equipped to combat mental illness than we are—not just as individuals but as a society.

When I hear that someone has died by suicide, it sucks the air out of my lungs. I am confused and sad and terrified to think of the grip that mental illness can have on a person. And my heart breaks for those who are left behind, those who may have known there was a problem, who may have tried and reached out, who walked that journey with that loved one, but who could not prevent tragedy.

There is much each of us can do to be more present for and compassionate toward people around us, but we cannot individually prevent or heal mental illness. A person who is grappling with mental illness isn't sad or down in the dumps; he or she is dealing with a real disease.

So we should reach out. But we also cannot do it alone. And there are other things we can do, too. We can work to make it OK to talk about mental illness. We can encourage people who have walked this journey to share their stories. We can be careful not to make jokes referring to mental illness—and to tactfully and kindly intervene when someone makes one of those jokes. We can remember that everyone has a burden we cannot see.

And we can pray for a better understanding of mental illness, as well as healing for those who are affected.

If you or someone you love is struggling with suicidal thoughts, contact the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255.