



In Memory of a Daughter



Grieving Father Helps Start Catholic Mental Health Ministry

By Deacon Ed Shoener



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The latest headlines are disturbing: “Researchers identify emerging rural suicide ‘belt.’”

“A silent epidemic: Confronting mental health in U.S. agriculture.”

Yet, other headlines show that there is still hope amid the despair:

“Dioceses wake up to youth mental health crisis, helping parents, teachers and pastors take action.”

“Bringing hope and healing through mental health ministry.”

A Parent’s Grief

Let me tell you my family’s mental health story. My daughter, Katie, lived with a serious mental illness called bipolar disorder. She lived with this illness for over 11 years, but she finally lost the battle to suicide in 2016, at the age of 29. In her short and simple obituary, I wrote this:

Katie Shoener, age 29, fought bipolar disorder for 11 years, but she finally lost the battle to suicide.

So often, people who have a mental illness are known as their illness. People say that "she is bipolar" or "he is schizophrenic." Over the coming days as you talk to people about this, please do not use that phrase.

People who have cancer are not cancer, those with diabetes are not diabetes. Katie was not bipolar—she had an illness called bipolar disorder. Katie herself was a beautiful child of God.

The way we talk about people and their illnesses affects the people themselves and how we treat the illness.

In the case of mental illness, there is so much fear, ignorance, and hurtful attitudes that the people who suffer from mental illness needlessly suffer further.

Our society does not provide

the resources that are needed to adequately understand and treat mental illness.

In Katie’s case, she had the best medical care available, she always took the cocktail of medicines that she was prescribed, and she did her best to be healthy and manage this illness—and yet, that was not enough.

Someday, a cure will be found, but until then, we need to support and be compassionate to those with mental illness, every bit as much as we support those who suffer from cancer, heart disease, or any other illness.

Please know that Katie was a sweet, wonderful person that loved life, the people around her, and Jesus Christ.

I had hoped Katie’s obituary would encourage an open and honest conversation in our small town of Scranton, Pennsylvania, about mental illness and suicide. I wanted to help address the mental health challenges in rural communities, breaking down the silence, stigma, and even the discrimination that people who live with mental illness all too often experience, even at times in our parish communities. However, what happened was totally unexpected. Her obituary went viral on social media. It was covered in the media around the world. Katie’s obituary has been seen by millions of people.

By telling our own mental health stories, we can normalize conversations about mental health in our parishes and demonstrate that our Church will support those among us with mental health challenges and illnesses. I am convinced that God used Katie’s obituary to deliver his message of love. It was just one small thing, but God used her obituary to help people understand that He is with them in their struggle with mental ill-



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ness—and He has mercy on those who die by suicide.

One person wrote to me: "God is using this for a good divine purpose, to educate others to be compassionate...do not be quick to judge because it can happen to you or anyone."

I now bring Katie's joyfulness and exuberance into the world by transforming her suffering into service to those who suffer from mental illness.

Mental Health Ministry

Since Katie's death, I have joined with many other good people to create the International Association of Catholic Mental Health Ministers (CMHM). People need to know that they can rely on their faith to face these challenges and support them in difficult times. They also need to know that their Church leaders and parish communities will not abandon them or turn away from them when they, or their family members, are struggling with mental illness or grieving a death by suicide.

That is where CMHM comes in. We help people start mental health ministries in their parish or diocese. Mental health minis-

try is a growing ministry in the Church that is striving to be a healing presence in the lives of people with mental illness. For the parents, family members, and friends of people living with a mental illness, mental health ministry provides spiritual support and comfort in their efforts to help their loved ones. Mental health ministry educates and informs people about the issues, struggles, and joys that can be found in the lives of people living with a mental illness.

In mental health ministry, we accompany people and love people in whatever circumstance they find themselves in. We try to love them with the passion of Jesus Christ and offer them a place of belonging. Mental health ministry is faith-based and God-centered. We reassure people that God is with them as they suffer, that God has not abandoned them, and that their parish community supports them. Our goal is to infuse the presence of God into the lives of people with mental health challenges and offer hope.

The CMHM supports parishes and dioceses in establish-

ing mental health ministries that provide vital spiritual accompaniment for people experiencing mental illness, as well as for those who care for them. The CMHM offers online training programs, films, and many other practical resources to help parishes start mental health ministries.

Many dioceses and parishes that serve rural communities have started mental health ministries, including the Dioceses of Des Moines, Iowa; St. Cloud, Minnesota; Boise, Idaho; Sacramento, California; and others.

To learn more about mental health ministry and how to start one in your community, visit the website of the International Association of Catholic Mental Health Ministers at Catholic-MHM.org.

If you are struggling with a mental health challenge or mental illness, know this: Your pain is real—but so is hope. Christ will never abandon you. You are never alone. Christ sees your beauty. Christ sees your dignity. ■