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Elyn Saks: Making Peace with Mental Illness

January 26, 2015

When Elyn Saks spoke to a standing-room only crowd during a recent event at McLean Hospital, the crowd remained riveted for the full hour as she vividly recounted her unprecedented journey as a person living with schizophrenia. During her talk, Saks emphasized the need for more compassion and awareness in understanding and treating those who live with mental illness.

Schizophrenia, she explains, affects a person's relationships in many ways. One must think in terms of having a relationship with one's own identity as a mentally ill person, one's relationships with social networks and the broader society, and one's relationship with the political systems that govern our lives.

When Saks was first diagnosed with schizophrenia at age 28 while attending law school, she didn't accept that she had a mental illness. Her doctors at the time were skeptical that she would ever hold down a full-time job and thought that maybe she would "be able to work as a cashier counting change."

Her clinicians could not have been more wrong.



Elyn Saks

Despite the diagnosis and the challenging road she had to take, Saks is a successful and much sought-after professor at the University of Southern California Gould School of Law with an adjunct appointment in the Department of Psychiatry at the Medical School of the University of California, San Diego.

She is also on the faculty of the New Center for Psychoanalysis, has received several prestigious awards and, in 2009, received a “genius grant” from the MacArthur Foundation that she used to establish the Saks Institute for Mental Health Law, Policy, and Ethics at USC. She presented a TED Talk about mental health in 2012 which has been viewed more than 2 million times.

“Excellent psychoanalytic treatment, close family and friends, and medication have been critical to my success,” she explains, but she pointed out that she struggled for 20 years to fully understand and accept her illness.

Saks is currently conducting research with colleagues about other successful people living with schizophrenia in order to show that she is not alone in her journey. Those people are doctors, lawyers, teachers, and graduate students, she says. “They are all doing fairly well. Most people—when given enough resources—can live up to their potential.”

Photo courtesy of USC Gould School of Law

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