

You Are Not Alone... Mental Health in Our Equestrian Community  
by Janice Byer, Life With Horses Photography

For many people, talking about mental illness can be uncomfortable and a stress ensuing experience. A lot of people don't want to admit if they have been dealing with something or they don't know how to help someone in their life who has been having difficulty.

Our Equestrian community is unfortunately no different. When a rider has a physical problem, it is often visible to the world. A broken leg; a sprained shoulder; or other injuries are talked about as people share their experiences and how they deal with the injury. Even concussions, which aren't visible, are talked about freely.

However, having a mental illness is not visible, so for many it is a case of, "If you can't see it then how can anything be wrong?" For others it's, "No one can see it so they won't believe me if I talk about it." We need to remove these statements from everyone's minds and open up the conversation about mental illness. In doing so, we will not only help those who are suffering in silence, but also to stop the stigma that mental health shouldn't be talked about.

If you look around at your barn family, I can almost guarantee that at least one (probably more) of them has a mental illness... maybe it's even you. Would you want to help and support your friend or have them be there for you if you need to talk? And at shows... everyone that goes into the ring has butterflies but they may also have a form of mental illnesses that can make those butterflies feel like Clydesdales having a parade inside you.

Many of you know me as a photographer at the horse shows and events in Southern Ontario. We see each other at the rings and throughout the showgrounds going about our horsie lives. We even have conversations and share some laughs. What we don't see is a sign on our backs that says, "I have a mental illness", so I don't know if you have one and you don't know if I have one. I actually often have people say to me when I tell them I have a mental health issue, "I had no idea! You don't appear to have any problems."

Nope... I don't "appear" to have an issue on the outside, but on the inside, yes, I do! For over 30 years I have suffered with Panic Disorder which is basically those Clydesdales I mentioned above living in me every day, ready to cause trouble. When I have a panic attack, they start partying on my stomach making me feel queasy; they sit on my lungs making me feel short of breath; and, they stomp on my heart making me feel like I am dying. The attacks come on at the worst times... usually when I visit a new place or where there will be a crowd of people. Everyone with a mental illness is different and has different symptoms at different times but we all wish we didn't have them at all.

Mental illnesses are not contagious. Talking about them won't hurt anyone and the communication could even be a life saver. Panic/anxiety, depression, and obsessive compulsive disorder are just some of the most common mental illnesses in our society today. They can be debilitating for those that suffer with them, but we don't need to be afraid that we can 'catch' the illness.

For me, I have been terrified to talk about my illness because one of the first people I told, my best friend at the time, had a reaction that crushed me. Back then the subject of mental illness was taboo and many felt that anyone with a mental illness should be hospitalized (or institutionalized). 1 in 5

people in our country suffers with a mental illness. Can you imagine 1/5 of our population being locked up in hospitals?

We learn to live each day with the illness and it can get very lonely. However, if we didn't have to keep it all bottled up inside, our lives could possibly be so much brighter. We can talk to our doctor or a mental health professional but if we could be open with those that have similar interests to ours and who may see us being afflicted by our illnesses at some point, it helps more than you can know. Not to mention, if we start the conversation, you will be surprised how many others not only have horses as a commonality, they may also have a mental illness that they have been afraid to talk about.

When you see me shooting at a show, please come talk to me. Whether you suffer from a mental illness and need someone to talk to or you want to know more about what it is like to live with one, I would be happy to spend some time with you. And remember to take part in Bell Let's Talk Day each year and help spread the word. You are not alone! Join the conversation! Let's Talk!

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Janice Byer has suffered with Anxiety and Panic Disorder for over 30 years. She became a professional, freelance Equine Photographer in Southern Ontario as a way to not only enjoy her horse & photography passions but also to get out of the house that was her safe place if an attack should come on. Each year she steps further out of her comfort zone by going to new locations to shoot that were scary in the past. She is so much happier as each hurdle is surpassed and she is becoming a much sought after photographer in the equestrian community. Visit her website at <http://www.lifewithhorses.ca> to see her photography, follow @lifewithhorsesphoto on Instagram and Facebook, and be sure to say hi to her when you see her at the shows this year.