

How to Write Publicly About Mental Illness

By Katie Rose Guest Pryal

In honor of Mental Health Awareness Month, I want to provide advice on how to write publicly about mental health and mental illness. One of the earliest columns I wrote was about mental health, and currently, I write a column for *Catapult* on disability and being a mom. When my book *Life of the Mind Interrupted: Essays on Mental Health and Disability in Higher Education* came out, I was pretty much officially a Person Who Writes About Having Mental Illness (if I hadn't been so already).

I even co-founded a magazine on disability, including psychiatric disability, with a disabled friend, which we edit—as volunteers—to give disabled writers a space to tell their stories. My public writing turned me into an activist who gives talks on and off campuses, consults with media and does a lot of other work behind the scenes.

As with writing publicly about sexual assault, there are risks and rewards when you write about mental health in public venues. But, today, I want to explain how to protect yourself from some of those risks. Here are some of the things you might want to consider before diving into the deep end of this public discourse.

Risky Disclosure

The main risk of writing publicly about having a mental illness is the consequences of disclosure. Mental illness, of course, is still stigmatized in our society. Depending on your situation (work, family, etc.), you might not feel safe disclosing your own mental illness in public. You need to think hard about whether you should disclose (1) whether you have a mental illness and (2) what your specific mental illness is.

The benefits of doing so include increased authority—you are speaking from a place of experience: “I know what it is like to be discriminated against as a person with mental illness because I am a person with mental illness.” But the drawbacks are, ironically, similar. People with mental illness are often written off as unworthy witnesses of our own experiences, as though we can't be counted on to tell our own stories properly. That's the double-bind.

I didn't publicly disclose my own mental illness until after I left my academic job. I would never have disclosed while I worked in the academy. But then again, I was never in a tenure-track position; my job wasn't secure. Your position might be different. Your school might be very supportive. (Mine was not.) The stigma is real, so make the best decision for yourself. You can write publicly about mental illness without coming out as disabled.

Emotional Labor

After I started writing on mental health and higher ed, I started receiving lots of emails from others in the academy who were, or had been, in a similar position to me. Some of these emails were kind of like fan mail; they thanked me for writing what others didn't feel safe saying, or for doing the

work I did. But others were not like that at all. They were harder to deal with because they required a lot of work from me. They asked me for a lot of help and professional advice for their particular situation. This included advice for how to handle their own mental health. And sometimes, I received messages from people in clear distress, and I could not help them. There were even messages in which the person told me they were actively contemplating suicide.

At first, I felt it was my duty to reply to the emails asking for advice, but I am not qualified to offer mental health advice. And yet, I felt as though the person deserved a caring response from me. Shouldn't I be supportive? And the messages from people in distress haunted me for days, for weeks.

This is the emotional labor that comes with writing about mental health on the internet. Be prepared. Don't do what I did. Don't spend all of your energy on every stranger that lands in your inbox. You won't have any energy left to take care of yourself. This is one of those “put your own oxygen mask on first” situations. Here's how I handle these

situations now:

- For professional advice queries, I write a short, kind email wishing the person well, and then I direct them to the book I wrote. Every bit of professional advice I have is contained in there, and it costs nine dollars. That seems fair to me.
- For mental health advice queries, I write a short, kind email wishing the person well. Then I tell them I am not a mental health professional, and I advise them to seek the services of one.
- For people in crisis situations, I tell them to call 911 (or the emergency number in their country if they're not in the United States). I do not mess around with this advice. I say, “You are in a medical crisis. Call 911 right now.” If they're reaching out to a stranger on the internet to talk about suicide, then they feel alone and need help. If they try to engage in a conversation about why they don't need to call 911, or that 911 is an overreaction to suicidal ideation, I tell them I will only chat with them after they call 911.

If this work sounds exhausting to you, you're correct. Fortunately, the emergencies are rare, and the other kinds I have down to a science.

Find a Community

As with writing about sexual assault, building a community is key. I have a great community of disabled writers that I built on social media. We help each other out in a variety of ways; we know which editors are supportive. We boost one another's work. We stand up for one another when trolls come calling. It's really amazing how wonderful social media can be. The primary social media for journalists (right now) is Twitter, so if you're planning on public writing, start a Twitter account and search for the leading disability and mental health scholars. They're out there, and fairly easy to find.

You need them; you all need one another. 

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