

Introduction: My name is R. Sullivan; I am a Recovery Specialist at Trilogy, Inc., in Chicago, and a member of Vineyard Christian Church of Evanston. I have decided to speak today to continue to break the silence and stigma that is associated with mental health issues. With the latest information on how medications can regulate the chemicals in the brain, mental illness can be compared to diabetes or high blood pressure. Once the chemicals are regulated then a person can be able to focus on learning better coping skills to manage stress and symptoms, and be able to live a near normal life.

But, I stand here today to tell you it is by the grace of Christ Jesus that I am here in one mind, spirit, and body! “Philippians 4.7 “And the peace of God which passeth all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.”

Because how many of you know today that once the body has been attended to by the doctors you must believe in God for your total complete healing? All areas in your life must be attended to: Body, mind, and soul. I have been living with mental illness for 10 years, but it was my entire life of not knowing how to deal with excessive baggage. Family problems-abuse issues, the pressures of being the perfect all-American (cheerleader, student government, etc) but under the surface I was dealing with a lot of pressures and insecurities.

First episode: I was working full-time and going to school full-time. I was getting very little sleep. I was an adult living at home with my mother and other siblings. There were problems. At the time I was working at Georgia Institute of Technology in Atlanta, Ga. And the office environment was a toxic bed of every “ism” you could think of. There was racism, sexism, and even regionalism. Going to work was pure agony. I describe this “pressure cooker analogy” because it began to build up a wall between a boss I had worked for 4 years. One day I was forced to stand up for myself after an open blatant affront of a racist co-worker. It was I who did not know who I was in the south as a young African-American woman in corporate America. Well, during this confrontation I broke down crying in the office, and I could not stop. I left the job. Went home, and did not get out of bed. This lasted for a week. My mother sought help by taking me to the hospital, where after a series of tests I was diagnosed with bi-polar disorder. I was given medications and sent home. I felt that I had been labeled and given a bottle of pills. So, I had no real grasp of mental illness, because the medications did not work. So I just thought I would “just get better.

My home church in Fort Lauderdale, Fl was concerned about my well being and they came to see about me. With much prayer and services attended, all seemed well. I got a new job, and I pushed that episode in Atlanta out of my memory. It seemed like a bad dream. I thought to myself all I needed was a changed of scenery.

“Well, mental illness doesn’t work that way.” Tell that to your neighbor seating next to you.

I felt it was all stress related. My family too felt everything had been caused by stress. I was just frustrated with the medications because of the lag in energy and weight gain. Thinking that I had a hold on everything in my life I thought I would go back to Georgia and complete my degree. Once in Georgia the first thing I did was make amends with my

former boss because as a Christian I did not like myself at that moment, during that time I broke down crying. I remembered saying some things I am not so proud of. I returned to school. But, because the medication made me lethargic and the weight gain was a constant downhill battle, I was not in compliance. Meaning I did not take it on a regular basis. Well, handling your medications like that is a combination for disaster. I remember I was pulled over for not having my proper papers for my car. I had them I just did not have them in the car. I tried to explain this in the most manic terms as possible and it landed me in traffic court without even the option to making a phone call. This lasted for 6 days. I sang like a jukebox every gospel and Christmas songs that I could breath out before my family was able to track me down to the from the point of my car's destination. Well, after the way I had been treated in Traffic court in Georgia, both angry and curious for better services, I had made up in my heart that things must be better in Chicago.

Soon after that incident, I caught a plane to Chicago in mid-winter. Once arriving, I checked into a hotel and called my sister. She soon arrived with her husband and the fire department and half of the mayor's police force. This was her "Amber Alert" looking for me in the metropolis city of Chicago, not on medication so she feared the worst. I then was taken to the hospital were I was diagnosed with being bipolar once again. The difference this time was the medication actually began to work. I could feel the difference. I will admit that compliance was an issue for a few years, because of the side effects from the medications. Elizabeth Swados states in her article in Oprah's October 2007 issue "Bipolar Diaries", "It takes a certain kind of patience to put up with this perpetual game of musical meds. I felt like a toxic waste dump. Pg. 376." Before the diagnosis I did not take anything stronger than aspirin. So, I still struggled with the acceptance of being labeled with mental illness.

True acceptance occurred after an incident had happened involving me that lead to my sister having to get involved in my affairs again. My sister told me with great emotion that, "you must come to terms to your illness." The emotion and seriousness in her tone lead me to finally look into my illness for myself. I then began to educate myself on mental illness and its causes. My main focus being on the chemical imbalance in the brain, and instead of hiding from it and the shame, I began to embrace it as a part of me and about me. The sobering fact was I would have to deal with this new found acceptance for the rest of my life.

Where am I today? I have been in medication compliance for almost 4 years. I completed my BA degree at Chicago State University. I am a Recovery Specialist at Trilogy, Inc., where I was awarded the Mission Award, in which my peers nominated and voted for me for excellence.

I will admit that I have some good days and some bad days. I am still working on regulating my energy and searching for the perfect mix medication that will do it all-energy, no weight gain, or side effects. I still work on avoiding draining people and situations that can be deemed as triggering stress in my life today.

I would like to leave you with a scripture that I hold close to my heart and mind; it is from the New Testament:

Philippians (13-15)

(13) “Forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forth unto those things which are before.

(14) I press toward the mark for the prize of the HIGH calling of God in Christ Jesus.

(15) Let us therefore, as many as be perfect, be thus minded: and if in any thing ye be otherwise minded, God shall reveal even this unto you.”

Maybe today there is someone hanging on by a thin thread and you do not know how to ask for help. Well, I feel that it no mistake that you are here today to hear this testimony and the guest speakers who specialize in this battle against ignorance in reference to mental illness. Make that phone call, ask questions.

Thank you for this opportunity.