



Voices of Hope for Mental Illness: Not Against, With

Jackie Goldstein

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We hear about inadequate mental health care. We ask questions regarding a link between mental illness and violence. We do NOT hear as much about the stigma of mental illness that complicates one's ability to cope with a diagnosis that becomes a label, resulting in "self-stigma," discouraging individuals from seeking and/or complying with treatment. Too often community members only "experience" mental illness through dramatic or dire media stories that fail to inform us about the real world of mental illness. Thus, stigma feeds, and is fed by, myths and misunderstandings leading to a community sense of hopelessness and fear of mental illness. In contrast, Geel, a stigma-free community in Belgium, has a centuries' old history of accepting those with mental illness – even as boarders in their own homes. Geel acknowledges the human needs of those with mental illness and responds to those needs by providing social opportunities and meaningful work, within the community. While the U.S. does not have the same history as Geel, we do have programs that offer a fostering environment, offering hope for those with a diagnosis of mental illness as well as for the communities in which they live. In a language and style that can be understood by anyone and everyone, the author shares what she's learned and experienced regarding tolerance and inclusion – in Geel and in our own country – offering individuals and communities an opportunity to hear the encouraging "voices of hope for mental illness." When the general population is freed of myths and misunderstandings regarding mental illness, we can focus on mental health fostered by community care that thrives in "caring communities."

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