**The invisibility of mental illness**

*For the wider public as Caroline Flack said – ‘in a world where you can be anything, be kind.’*

It is my privilege to work in a field such as mental health for so many years. I can truly say this profession, the patients and people I have met, has shaped my views on life, made me more resilient and enhanced my practices. My priority has always been and will continue to be ensuring the highest quality of care is provided to people who use the mental health services.

I recall, in the early days of my career, when I told friends, family and people I met that I worked in mental health ,they would say 'what, that's dangerous isn't it?! My response was always that - there is more danger in the world than on a mental health ward.

The public has for many years viewed mental health care and services as taboo and the Cinderella of healthcare. Thankfully, this view is gradually changing. What is forgotten is that 'mental health' does not mean mental illness or disorder. Mental illness or imbalance are not always something which can be seen objectively. Most times, it's only the person experiencing these issues who is aware, and sometimes they are not even aware that the changes they are experiencing is actually a mental illness.

Mental stability is closely linked to our life experiences and our emotional response; in addition, of course, our genetic predisposition and environmental factors. However, the point is that when we think of mental illness, we think of what we see on television, what the lunatic asylums represented. This is mostly not the case. The face of mental illness can be anyone, even the richest or most famous to the unfortunate homeless person on the street.

Statistics have shown that a number of people live with a mental illness in silence due to the stigma, which can affect all aspects of one's life, relationships, employment prospects, and quality of life etc. This is the reason society MUST be more thoughtful and stop judging others based on what we see externally. Each day, each person is living life the best and the fullest they can. When we meet or speak about someone, we do not know if our actions can be a final straw, a precursor to a mental breakdown or a life saver. Life is like a stage, we put on the best show each day until the curtains close when we are alone. We must remember clothes, cars, and material things enhance our look and feeling of well-being but our mental health is just as important or even more important.

In a time of social media when anything we do can be scrutinized by anyone, even those who have absolutely no insight into our mental state, it’s even more integral that we stay grounded, remember who we are and ensure we feed and nurture our mental well-being. There is no shame in speaking to friends, family or a health professional when it is needed. No shame at all. At the end of the day, we are human beings not robots. We may get a physical illness at any time that we must seek treatment for. Treatment must be sought in the same way when our brains need a boost.

By Christiana Joseph (Senior Lecturer)