

Chairman Alexander, Ranking Member Murray, and Members of the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee:

I thank each of you for inviting me here today to testify before this committee. Moreover I am moved to be able to contribute my voice to an issue that has impacted me for over half of my life - mental illness.

My journey with mental illness began in 1998 during my freshman year at Harvard University. Three weeks into my first semester, I was struck by my first terrifying panic attack. At the time, I could not find words to describe the deep terror I felt, but I knew something was wrong. My journey continued when I had my first manic episode.

During the spring of 1999, I roamed the streets of my Long Island, NY neighborhood possessed with the delusion that I was a prophet and would save the world with my prophecies. Concerned, my parents sent me to Grenada to relax and be with family. However, there I plunged into a deep depression. I returned to Harvard that fall and struggled with anxiety and depression.

In the spring of 2000, I had a second manic episode. My next two weeks were filled with sleepless nights. I showered less frequently and ate sporadically. I had visions of Jesus, heard cars talking and “spoke” foreign languages. This time my parents rushed me to a psychiatric hospital. I was hospitalized for two weeks in Queens, NY. My attending psychiatrist diagnosed me with bipolar disorder and explained that I would be on several medications. Upon my release from the hospital I met with a Brooklyn-based psychiatrist who end up working with me for the next nine years.

After adjusting to heavy medication, I returned to Harvard University to continue my studies in psychology. However, due to cognitive impairment and other complications, I left school. In 2002, I returned, refocused and persevered to graduate from Harvard with honors. After receiving my bachelors, I continued on to graduate school at Columbia University. I received a dual masters in psychological counseling, and after worked for several years as a college academic advisor. All throughout this journey I have contended with the ups and downs of depression, anxiety and complications from medication including weight gain and cognitive slowing. Yet through this struggle and isolation, I have found ways to thrive and use my pain as a vehicle to fuel my work.

In 2012, I began speaking openly about my struggle with mental illness. To date, I have spoken to thousands of individuals with mental illness, their family members, law enforcement officials, faith based communities, teachers and mental health professionals. Since 2013, I have been the NAMI Queens/Nassau Let’s Talk Mental Illness presenter. In this role, I delivered over 300 presentations to more than 20,000 college, high school and middle school students.

My advocacy work has helped bishops and pastors open up to their congregations; a mother seek help for her son who was traumatized by police brutality and another seek professional help after

her daughter, an Olympian medalist, died by suicide. I have seen a homeless student, beset by anger issues and diagnosed with bipolar disorder, completely transform after opening up to her school social worker. Students have shared their struggles with me and to adults in their lives because of my mental health presentations. I believe this work is vital in saving lives.

My recovery and this work would not be possible if I did not have a firm foundation anchored in good mental health and wellness. My life has been informed but not limited by my mental illness. I have found ways to thrive and attribute my recovery to perseverance, support and access. The combination of these three factors has been essential to my wellness.

My wellness has been sustained in part due to a strong support network. My family has and continues to play an integral role in providing emotional, mental and financial support. Having this essential and consistent foundation has aided my recovery in innumerable ways. Along with a supportive family structure, upon my return to college, I utilized the readily available support structures at Harvard, including psychiatric visits and psychotropic medications.

Medication has played a huge role in my recovery. Daily I still use key antipsychotics and antidepressants that aid in my stability. This journey to find the right combination of medication has been marked with different dosages and combination of drugs, weight gain, cognitive impairment and long bouts of abysmal depression and paralyzing anxiety.

Along with medications, support groups have played a role in my recovery; the power of being able to confide in and relate to others going through similar experiences cannot be understated. Engaging with peers has shown me that even in my darkest times I am not alone. Along with peer support groups, programs like NAMI's In Our Own Voice, have given me platforms to share my story with communities and other people struggling with mental illness. Communities are an essential component for wellness, hence I am currently developing an online platform for these communities to continue to grow and thrive and for the voices of people impacted by mental illness to be heard.

My journey does not encompass the full range of experiences of those impacted by mental illness. Living with mental illness is highly individualized; even people with the same diagnosis may have completely unique experiences. As a mental health speaker, educator and advocate, I have been fortunate to hear and see a spectrum of these experiences.

Through my personal advocacy and work with NAMI, I have heard from many people struggling to find work and housing because of a variety of barriers including discrimination related to their mental illness. I have spoken to hundreds of people in numerous support groups which have included NAMI Family to Family classes and Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance peer support group. During these conversations, parents have spoken about their struggle to support their loved one, whether due to lack of ability to access treatment or because their loved one refuses treatment. People with lived experience have shared that they are unable to access medication because of insurance issues or loved ones with family members who have been

incarcerated due to their struggles with symptoms and not because of criminal intent. Some can point to an experience like mine - full recovery. However many have spoken to the other side of this experience.

Wellness should not be determined by favorable life situations, or serendipitous experiences. Rather, recovery from mental illness should be supported by established, effective and easily accessible resources. I have worked hard to sustain my recovery and wellness living with mental illness however; I have had structures that have lent to my recovery while many do not.


For this reason, Mr. Chairman, I and advocacy groups I am affiliated with, including NAMI, are very excited about this legislation designed to reform our public mental health system - a system which should afford wellness for all. The S 1893, the Mental Health Awareness Act, is a good start, but given what I have experienced and have seen through my advocacy work, more is needed; individuals living with mental illness, and families impacted by mental illness need assistance sooner than later.

Both NAMI and I support S 1945, drafted by Senators Cassidy and Murphy (members of this Committee). A few of the important provisions in S 1945 that I feel would go a long way toward reforming our mental health system and contributing to a better life for people living with serious mental illness and their families are:

- Grants to the states to better integrate physical and mental health,
- Establishment of a new Assistant Secretary for Mental Health and Substance Use at HHS,
- Creation of a new Interagency Serious Mental Illness Coordinating Committee and a National Mental Health Policy Laboratory,
- New transparency requirements and stepped up enforcement of the federal mental health parity law,
- New requirements in the federal Mental Health Block Grant program for outreach and engagement to the most difficult to serve

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Murray and Members of the HELP Committee, I am aware I am testifying as a voice for people living with mental illness. My experience does not represent the full breadth of the experience living with mental illness, however my presence here does give a face to the millions of people in America struggling, striving and thriving with mental health conditions. Recovery from mental illness should be a real option for all. This bill is a pronounced step in this direction. I deeply and respectfully urge this Committee to move forward on this strong bipartisan bill - millions of American are depending on a collective shift in how we treat and allow people to live their best lives in the face of mental illness.

Sincerely,



Hakeem Rahim
Mental Health Speaker and Advocate