

Understanding mental illness

A face of mental illness: Sam Miltich
The star jazz guitarist who has captivated the ears of his hometown with amazing musical talent tells his story of life with schizophrenia

By Britta Arendt
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He says it's like capturing a badger in a gunny sack.

At least you don't have a badger on the loose "but you still have to deal with a gunny sack moving all over the place."

This is how Sam Miltich describes life trying to manage mental illness.

Three years ago, Miltich was diagnosed with schizophrenia. A brain disorder that causes people to interpret reality abnormally, schizophrenia disrupts usual balance of emotions and thinking resulting in hallucinations, delusions and disordered behavior, as defined by the Mayo Clinic.

As defined by Miltich, schizophrenia causes "kernels of reality to be blown out of proportion" and it acts like "an animal in a bag."

During Mental Health Month this May, several local events have been organized to increase awareness and put a face to mental illness which affects one in five families in America. Miltich is participating in these events as part of The Big Dipper Jazz Band which will be performing a benefit concert for the Mental Health Education Fund on Thursday, May 20 at Davies Theater at Itasca Community College.

Grand Rapids' own gypsy jazz guitar extraordinaire, Miltich is also sharing his story with the hope that people will come to understand that mental illness can happen to anyone, that it is treat-

able and social injustice toward those with mental illness is a big issue.

Miltich said people don't realize that, "The realm between people not being ill and being ill is very slim."

The hold of schizophrenia

Miltich said his schizophrenia causes him to exaggerate the truth to the point that it makes him paranoid. This paranoia then results in a false sense of self.

"My biggest problem is reading people wrong."

While social interactions are hard for everyone with mental illness, Miltich explained that he feels he "frequently gets things backwards."

For this reason, Miltich said his delusions involve some small piece of reality. It can start with just a simple glance on the street.

"This guy looked at me funny. Was it because I missed a button or was it because he wanted to kill me?"

From here, Miltich says the delusions escalate and spur bad thoughts in his head.

"Then I hear, 'you suck,' 'you're selfish,' 'you're a bad guitar player.'"

Miltich has experienced more audible hallucinations than visible. When he does have a visible hallucination, he says it is "absolutely terrifying."

The images he sees seem to be in plain sight.

"I haven't had many, but they've been horrid."

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when Miltich's delusions lead him to think he is a bad person, he says he starts talking about demons and he believes he is talking to God who seems to reaffirm to him that he is a bad person. And this has meant Miltich must work to separate his real and fake spiritual life.

"There's no God that wants any person to hurt themselves. I try to remember those things when I'm ill. But it's a battle every day."

Before he was diagnosed and even shortly after, Miltich couldn't believe he was sick.

"I wasn't sick, I wasn't ill; but I was telling them the cops were coming after me."

His first challenge was to accept it himself then help his family understand his illness.

"It took a year before the meds had an effect."

Miltich said he "still feels young" in his illness but he "can look back and see a glimmer" of memories of when he was sick.

He's learned that, with medication, and changes in lifestyle, he can manage his illness.

"I've also learned, this illness is cyclical. For me it's cyclical with the seasons."

Managing mental illness

There are four main things Miltich does to manage the illness. He takes his meds every day at the same time; is conscience about how much sleep he gets; keeps a healthy diet ("because it's fuel for the brain") and he exercises ("for the endorphins - for increased brain function").

With this foundation, Miltich sticks to a strict daily schedule: "Exercise, eat, then practice my scales and arpeggios."

The regimen his uses for his profession as a musician, he now also applies to his health.

"I want to feel prepared when I'm going to perform. If I can wake up and do everything I can to prepare, anything else is out of my control."

Miltich's new recipe for managing his life and illness has proven to be successful. However, he must constantly

be conscious of it.

To help him, Miltich says he is grateful for a good support system in his home community with his immediate family, his wife and his band members - many who have seen others struggle with mental illness.

"Now, if I'm struggling, I have a strong foundation under me."

For those family members or community members who may not understand his illness, Miltich wants to use his unique position in the public spotlight to work at eliminating stigma.

"The only press mental illness gets is if it's bad."

Miltich addressed many misperceptions of mental illness such as the thought that only criminals and artists have mental illnesses; that mental illness is a product of the times; and that people with mental illness "just need to pull themselves up by their boot straps and get a life."

Speaking passionately about the issue, Miltich explained:

"Only a tiny percent of artists have mental illness and only a tiny percentage of criminals have mental illness.

"It is not a product of the times; it affects one percent of the world population, across culture, across geographies, across generations.

"We don't resent people who have Alzheimer's or cancer but we do with mental illness - thinking [those with mental illness] are a drain on the system."

"People need to understand with mental illness that it's not like, 'boy, I'm having a really tough time, man.' Having a mental illness is a huge disability. When sick, I couldn't even play my guitar. I need my brain to be fully functioning to create art."

At peace with jazz

Miltich finds his peace with jazz - a musical genre he refers to as "my music." He said he is free from symptoms when on a stage with his guitar performing jazz.

"Performing for me is the greatest thing on earth. In front of a crowd, if I'm playing jazz, it doesn't phase me;

if I'm playing another style of music, it does phase me."

The most difficult part of living with mental illness, Miltich says, are the things he can't control. That's why he works so hard at the things he can control like lifestyle and medication. And the discipline and courage it takes to do just that demonstrates how many people with mental illness actually have stronger minds because of all they do to fight off their demons.

"There are so many amazing, remarkable people who have lived their lives despite it."

Miltich listed several great musicians who he's learned lived with mental illness like the late American jazz pianist Bud Powell.

"It doesn't define someone. We don't say, 'there's diabetic Bob or cancerous John.'"

Recovery

Miltich says every individual's path to recovery is personal.

"Like diabetes, recovery is in management of the illness."

Miltich feels fortunate to live in a community that has both family and peer support groups as well as services for people with mental illness.

"I thought my experiences were too bizarre that no one would understand but I went to the peer support group and was blown away because others had experienced the same."

After witnessing social injustice toward people with mental illness, Miltich intends to use his talents to help make change for the better for those like him who experience the daily trials that come with diagnosis and those who don't understand the disease.

"I refuse to let it be a tragedy," said Miltich. "If I started crying, I wouldn't stop."