

Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education

Volume 54

Article 6

September 2018

It's OK to Talk About These Things

Abigail Gosselin

Janet Houser

Loretta K. Notareschi

Follow this and additional works at: <https://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations>

Recommended Citation

Gosselin, Abigail; Houser, Janet; and Notareschi, Loretta K. (2018) "It's OK to Talk About These Things," *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*: Vol. 54 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol54/iss1/6>

It's OK to Talk About These Things

Regis University Faculty Members

Introduction

Last year, a group of faculty members and the provost at Regis University shared their experiences with mental disorders with the Regis community. In the fall we had suffered through several suicides by members from our community, and much of the campus was reeling in pain. The suicides had several effects, including increasing awareness of mental health issues, increasing people's willingness to get professional help for their suffering, and for some people possibly triggered latent symptoms. This led to students increasing their use of counseling services and also confiding their troubles to faculty and staff more than they had previously. Regis responded with several education, training, and outreach efforts. Some faculty members and the provost have been personally impacted by mental illness, and we wanted to do our part to increase awareness and decrease stigma, as well as to be role models for willingness to be vulnerable in front of others and for seeking out help when needed. In the fall, Abigail Gosselin shared her own story with bipolar illness (manic depression) in an evening discussion; in the spring three faculty members and the provost shared their stories about anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, and major depression. In the following narratives, three of us describe the reasons why we share our stories with the Regis community.

Decreasing Stigma of Mental Illness

In my first year at Regis, I had a student in one of my introductory philosophy classes who was noticeably struggling, not only academically but also behaviorally. He ended up having to leave midway through the semester, and I learned later that he had bipolar disorder, an illness I also have. After seeing him suffer and wanting desperately to be able to connect with him, I decided to be open about my illness from then on. If he had known I was bipolar probably nothing would have changed; yet I hoped that in being open I could give students with this illness a point of connection and a resource. I wanted to show them that one can suffer badly from a mental illness and yet still be a functional member of society and have both career and family.

Being open about my struggles has made me a better teacher and mentor. In connecting with students, I often draw upon my own vulnerability and my experiences with suffering, and I model being vulnerable in front of others and seeking help when I need it. Over the years, I have mentored many students with mental health and substance use issues, and I have told my story to many groups of students in an effort to increase understanding and decrease stigma. My personal experiences allow me to approach my integrative core classes on mental health and drugs and society in a distinctive way, and my students seem to



get more out of those classes as a result. Although my bipolar illness has made my job challenging, being open about my struggles has allowed me to connect with people in important ways and to carry out the Regis Jesuit mission more deeply.

Abigail Gosselin is a professor of philosophy at Regis University in Denver. Her current work is on the intersections between mental illness, agency, and stigma.

Prevailing with the Struggle of Clinical Depression

In my first six months as provost, I attended seven funerals of members of the Regis community. Five were suicides. People didn't say the word out loud; I heard dozens of euphemistic phrases for killing oneself. This in-

ability to say the words out loud hampers our ability to deal with pain and reinforces the perceived stigma around mental health issues. I understand this hesitance. I come from the Midwest, where mental illness is often judged as a character flaw that a person can "get over" if one is just determined to be well.

I decided to come out, so to speak, with my own struggles with clinical depression as a counterweight to this perception. If a provost can struggle with mental health issues and prevail, then there is hope for others who may see their mental illness as an immovable barrier to a successful and happy life. I served on a panel and shared my own struggles with clinical depression, which first revealed itself during graduate school. For at least two decades, I tried to "tough it out," buying into the rhetoric that my frequent "despair with no name" was a choice that I could change.

At my lowest point, I tried to give my dogs to my next door neighbor so that I could gas myself with carbon monoxide knowing they would be cared for. To her credit, my neighbor refused and gave me the name of her brother-in-law, a psychiatrist. Fifteen years later, I credit him with both saving my life and giving me a future filled with accomplishment and joy.

Students, faculty, and staff need to feel comfortable saying the words, speaking the names, asking the questions. We are more powerful than we know in saving lives and giving back futures.

Janet Houser is the provost and a professor at Regis. She has authored six books in research and statistics and was a member of ICP Cohort 2.

Shedding Light on Postpartum Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder

In 2013, I gave birth to my beautiful daughter, Ruby. I fell in love with her instantly. Yet, soon after giving birth, my love for Ruby mixed with fear, and I began having scary thoughts. What if I threw her down the spiral staircase? What if I stabbed her with a knife? What if I drowned her in the bathtub?

Terrified, I tried to control my thoughts by repeating certain phrases to myself. I also repeated musical patterns in my mind; I rearranged knives; I avoided the

spiral staircase; and I constantly checked the temperature of Ruby's room.

Soon I was diagnosed with postpartum obsessive-compulsive disorder (PPOCD), a condition that affects up to nine percent of postpartum mothers, and some fathers, too.

Pop culture depicts OCD as a preoccupation with tidiness, but OCD is actually a serious disease of panic brought on by intrusive thoughts. Admitting these thoughts is horrifying. At first, I kept my disease secret from anyone other than healthcare providers, close family members, and one friend. I felt like a monster, and I was ashamed.

In 2015, I decided to write a piece called "String Quartet OCD" about my suffering. In 2016 and 2017, through performances, lectures, and media interviews, I went public with my story.

My students attended some of these events, and I began to speak openly to them about my suffering. I wanted to spread awareness about PPOCD and to reduce the stigma of mental illness. It is wrenching to speak shameful thoughts aloud. There is great power in doing so, however, not only in the relief you feel about telling the truth, but also in empowering others to speak their truth about mental illness.

As educators, we often tell students that we must not avoid difficult conversations, but rather work through them to greater understanding. By sharing our own difficult stories, we model this in a personal and authentic way.

Loretta K. Notareschi is a composer and an associate professor of music at Regis University. Her TEDx talk, "Understanding Mental Illness Through Music," is available online.



Conversations Seeks New Editor

Conversations, the national Jesuit magazine for the 28 universities and colleges, seeks a new editor. Fr. Ed Schmidt, S.J., will have completed six years in this role by April of next year. He has worked with our layout editor and the Seminar board to take the magazine a much higher degree of excellence and readability, including a shift to full color throughout the magazine. The National Seminar in Jesuit Higher Education, which publishes *Conversations*, is now looking for a new editor who can advance the magazine in a multitude of ways, which will include both printed and online capacities. For all past issues see www.conversationsmagazine.org as well as <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/> for the earliest issues. The growth area will be in social media and digital capacity.

Qualifications

The successful candidate for editor will have experience in Jesuit higher education, capacity for organizing the directing a publication, a high degree of expertise in editing, and capacity to gauge the audience for the magazine. He/she should have a breadth of interests and sensitivities in order to ensure that multiple and diverse points of view on our campuses are represented.

Compensation

A modest stipend goes with the position of editor. All expenses, including travel, are covered.

Application

Please submit a letter of interest, along with a Curriculum Vitae, to

Patrick Howell, S.J., chair;
National Seminar on Jesuit Higher Education
Seattle University
924 E Cherry St.
Seattle WA 98122.

For further information, you may contact Father Howell ("Pat") directly at 206-296-6356 (o) or at patrickh@seattleu.edu.