Insight into recovery from mental illness and ongoing management of conditions
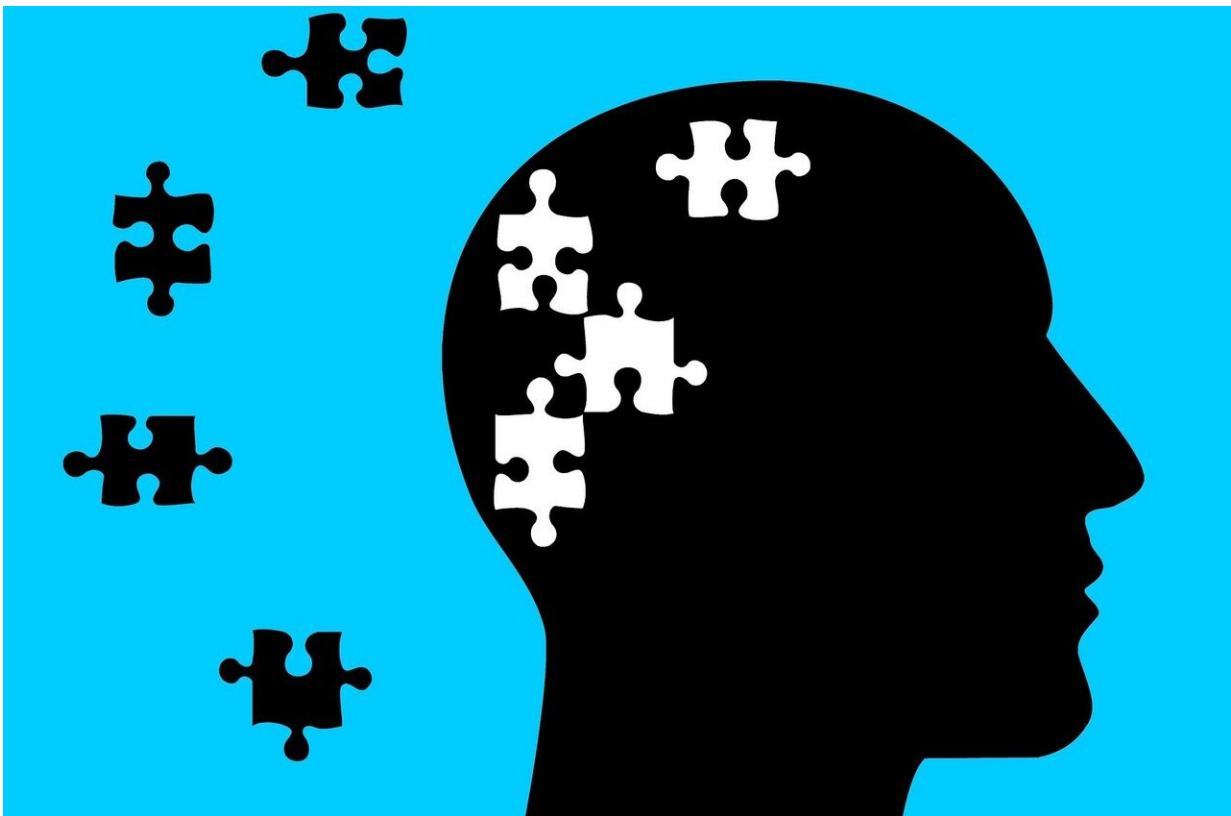
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New research explores personal experiences of mental illness through the portrayal offered by bloggers.

Published in *Issues in Mental Health Nursing*, the research by Dr. Leanne Staniford from Lancaster University and Luciana White from York St John University offers a window into the lived experiences of people who suffer with <u>mental health issues</u> and their related identity struggles.

The study, titled "Personal Narratives of Mental Illness: From Hostage to Survivor," set out to understand how people with <u>mental illness</u> perceive and portray their conditions, and how they build their social identities. The research analyzed first-hand accounts taken from online blogs, giving access to representations of mental health issues portrayed by the bloggers.

Dr. Leanne Staniford, Lecturer in Clinical Psychology at Lancaster University, said, "Understanding lived experiences of mental illness is important to inform the development of effective psychological support services. Exploring personal narratives allows a longitudinal focus on the experiences of individuals living with a mental illness, gaining an insight into the reality and the impact this can have on an individual's life."

Luciana White, academic associate in the School of Education, Language and Psychology at York St John University, describes her motivation for the research:

"I have always been passionate about the stories people tell. They are always so rich and so great for creating empathy, human connection and reflection. Being in touch with personal narratives allows us to get closer to individual experiences and to connect with other realities. By looking into personal narratives, we are not only exploring the individuals' self-portrait, but also an understanding of the world and the social dynamics we are immersed in."

Two main themes were identified to describe how the bloggers approached their conditions; the hostage and the survivor. Those

grouped as the hostage have not yet found a path to managing their condition, appearing vulnerable and fueled by darkness and a lack of hope.

In addition, the bloggers perceive stigma as a standard social reaction to their condition. Their experiences include negative descriptions such as "...If you are an outsider, it's a vile time to be alive. You never feel more disliked, left out"; "It did never get any better. They tell you to have faith, hope. It's bound to get better, but it didn't"; and "I wanted to curl up into a ball, fall into an everlasting sleep. They would be better off without me."

In contrast, the survivor blogs were fueled by positivity, with the sufferer's recovery usually underway. This group of bloggers appeared knowledgeable, confident in their recovery and were not defined by their mental illness. The language and descriptions of their experiences in turn was much more positive; "I'm fine. I will be fine. I'm so happy. Anxiety and mental health [have] a funny way of making life a rollercoaster"; "I can do it. I will do it. But the anxiety around a 'double relapse' is very real"; and "It's not my fault I'm ill. It feels unfair. I am sad and angry about it. I will not let myself feel ashamed."

The two narratives led to the design of a model for mental illness trajectory (MMIT), where in order to find recovery, individuals go through a process of recreating their social self, adopting more positive coping strategies, to move from hostage to survivor. The MMIT demonstrates the transformation within six steps; awareness, rejection, self-help, acceptance, treatment and recovery.

The investigation of personal accounts of mental illness and their subjective experiences, provides insight into what recovery and successful management of mental illness might look like, and has been recognized by researchers as an important step towards improving the

lives of patients.

Data collection began with keywords such as "personal blogs," "anxiety," "anxious," "depression," "depressed" and "mental health" combined in different ways on internet searches. An initial search resulted in a list of 133 blogs, refined to a final list of 12 blogs following a sampling strategy: publicly accessible blogs, bloggers being based in UK, blogs written in English and blogger aged 18 or over, blogs edited in last two years, and posts being relevant to mental health topics.

Of the 12 blogs in the study, eight were written by women, one co-written by a man and woman, and three were written by men.

More information: Luciana White et al, Personal Narratives of Mental Illness: From Hostage to Survivor, *Issues in Mental Health Nursing* (2023). DOI: 10.1080/01612840.2023.2186142

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