

# 'Community Mental Health' should have compassion, ears, patience

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My wish is that mental health didn't have such a cloud over it.

A cloud that covers what people endure, how they suffer and the fog felt when they feel they face what they face alone: depression, anxiety, or any disorder that isn't common, or comfortable, to discuss.

While I believe within certain circles it is becoming more acceptable — friend-to-friend, confidant-to-confidant — and while I feel there is more communication and trust, a community as a whole needs to help their own people in pushing away that cloud cover.

On Thursday, that discussion is happening as mental health state leaders and advocates join for "Mental Health Summit: The Time is Now! A Day to Discover What Community Mental Health Should Look Like."

It is a follow up to a summit last year where proposed legislation was presented, and subsequently passed, to recommend all law enforcement personnel in Alabama be trained in Crisis Intervention Team training.

Presenting at the Embassy Suites Hotel in Montgomery this week includes the state's mental health commissioner, Lynn Beshear, as well as Montgomery County Sheriff Derrick Cunningham; Kelly Emerson, executive director of NAMI (National Alliance on Mental

Illness) Alabama; Judge Steve Leifman, associate administrative judge, Miami-Dade County Court; and House Speaker Mac McCutcheon, R-Monrovia.

My own wish for “community mental health” is for those who need a safe place to go, to be able to have a safe and trusting place to go. For those dealing with a mental health issue to feel they have a voice.

A strong voice.

For those dealing with any mental health issue, to securely know they are not alone. And not only because someone else experiences the same illness. But because community hands are reaching out to help from everywhere.

My wish is they understand they're not a burden. For others to understand they are not using "sadness" as a reason or an “excuse” for anything. Because — and trust me — it is the last anything someone wants to face from the moment they wake until their body just gives in and they fall asleep at night.

Because sleeping is just easier than staying awake feeling that low.

Community mental health needs to acknowledge that. That's my wish. To say, "Hey. Hi. We are here. We want to help you. Help us understand what you need."

**Mental health:** [How Alabama is responding](#)

**Lynn Beshear:** ['Mental health is not a character flaw'](#)

What lawmakers and advocates will accomplish on Thursday, I don't know. But what I want to address as a survivor of suicide — I lost my sister two years ago — and as someone who has been diagnosed with major clinical depression as a result, and who quietly advocates for care and outreach, is this:

A community needs to show compassion. Please don't say you "understand" depression because your aunt deals with the same thing — you learn quickly one person's mental health issue isn't identical to another's — or because you were sad one day last week.

You learn quickly that there is a difference between depression and being depressed. We've all been depressed when we didn't get the raise, the promotion, or when our best friend moved.

Depression, however, is a feeling so low, and an emptiness so deep, that there seems no way out. And it can become deeper and stronger as the days wear on. Have compassion and knowledge that this person cannot just pull themselves out from this. They can't "snap" out of it.

**More:** [How my sister's suicide led me to depression, and what I'm doing about it](#)

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And because you see them smiling and carrying on with friendships and relationships and their job does not mean they are not exhausted to all ends at the effort it takes to appear normal.

Just because they are not always curled up on the couch and "looking" sad, doesn't mean they're OK. They're as high functioning as you — if not more so because of the extra effort they feel they need to make every day appear normal.

[NAMI states that one in five adults](#) in the U.S. live with a mental illness — that's 43.8 *million* people, or 18.5 percent of the U.S. adult population.

This is in a given year.

Look around you in a crowded room. That's right. Most of the time, you don't even know their struggle. Those with anxiety? They could be the quietest, taking those deep or quick breaths you don't even notice.

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This is their survival tactic, and is either what they or their therapist taught them to do to get through this one moment.

So often, mental illness isn't something you can "see." That's what makes this so hard. Because a smile can put everyone under the assumption you're just fine.

A community needs patience.

Those suffering with a mental health issue want nothing more than to become better. To feel more alive. To feel normal and as carefree as they were before whatever it is that has taken over.

A person doesn't "choose" their mental health. We can all work toward better mental health — New Year, New You, right? — but a person with a mental health diagnosis can't just "switch" on and off. Patience in the process to become better or more stable is needed.

Patience in not taking anything personally — this is not about you. Patience is needed in trying to help others and in trying to understand what someone needs: for you to stay away, for you to be closer, to provide an ear. That ear is a Godsend.

Because, sometimes, a community needs to understand that a person only wants to be heard.

That's my wish, is for a community to listen. To really pay attention to needs. To provide those needs, making them accessible for everyone. To reach those hands out to those hurting, to those who need to talk, and to those who just need a break.