Singer-songwriter Judy Collins: Determined to find mental health

By Leah Samuel

Singer-songwriter Judy Collins, 77, has reached generations of fans since her 1961 debut, and still maintains a grueling performance schedule. She has also turned her earlier struggles with addiction and mental illness into lyrics and autobiographical books documenting her struggles. Her openness earned her this year’s McLean Award. Bestowed this week by McLean Hospital in Massachusetts, the award recognizes individuals who have helped increased understanding of mental health and behavioral issues.

STAT spoke with Collins this week. The interview has been condensed and edited.

Do you think other celebrities should use their fame to raise awareness about mental health?

I don’t proselytize, if that’s the right word. Maybe others don’t have anything to say about it. I don’t concern myself with what other celebrities do. It’s none of my business.

What is your health advice for those of us who would like to perform 100 shows a year at even half your age?

Health begins with sobriety. I’ve been sober 38 years. I once took everything I could get my hands on. You get free of the chains of addiction, and something amazing happens.

I exercise every day. I have a treadmill and bicycle in my home. I do my stretches and my crunches. No sugar, no wheat or corn — which are all ingredients in alcohol, funny enough.

I like alternatives to Western medicine, although I have a naturopath who says, “If you’re doing all these remedies and you still feel lousy, go to a hospital.” She isn’t rigid, and I would never go to someone who was.

How have you been able to maintain your recovery for so long?

I’ve discovered my mental and physical health through excruciating trial and error. It’s little things, really. The eight hours of sleep, don’t eat a lot of junk, and run around. We’ve gotten rid of recess, but kids and everybody need to run around. Tickling your fancy is also important, as long as you don’t become a sex addict.

And talk therapy, enough of it, can heal people. You need to talk about what’s going on. Or have a couple of close buddies you can pour your heart out to, and laugh with at the same time. I also try to tell as many jokes as possible. I got this one from Steven Wright: Guy goes to the border and they ask, “Do you have any weapons?” and the guy says, “What do you need?”
You’ve been candid about your own suicide attempt in the 1950s, and you lost your son Clark to suicide in 1992. Have you noticed any changes in how society deals with suicide in the decades since?

When I was young and tried to kill myself, no one said anything about it. There was no therapy. If you attempt suicide and survive, they think you’re OK.

Nowadays, if you can find a bookstore, you can check the shelf and see books, like “The Savage God,” that just talk about the drama, the drama. We all know about the drama. I wrote the book “Sanity and Grace: A Journey of Suicide, Survival, and Strength” to break the taboo of talking about it.

Do you think suicide can be prevented?

[After Clark died] I learned that he’d made some attempts. So, I don’t know about prevention. It’s still a big question about what it is and where it comes from. There’s a very interesting and rich history of how people have attempted to do themselves in. And I think if they’re determined, they’ll find a way. But if you’re determined to find mental health, you’ll find that. It’s just about which cudgel you decide to pick up. Camus said that suicide is one of the major psychological questions for everyone on the planet. When Clark died, I had to make the choice not to commit suicide.

If you’re attending to your mental health, you’re certainly less likely to take your own life.

What is fun in your life now? What is Judy Collins laughing about these days?

I love humor. I love jokes. I’ve seen “Hamilton” three times. I love movies. I love reading. And right now, the period of 300 BC to 1 BC is interesting to me right now. I love politics — what makes you cry makes you laugh, right?