Glenn Close: 'Mental Illness Is a Family Affair'

Inspired by her sister's struggles, the award-winning actress and activist works to erase the stigma of mental health conditions.

By Gina Shaw
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In flashes of childhood memory, actress Glenn Close can still see her younger sister, Jessie, anxiously picking at the skin between her forefinger and thumb. Many children have nervous habits -- but Jessie's seemed different.

"She'd worry that skin until it was all bleeding and crusty," she recalls. "Today, that kind of anxiety and hurting yourself would be a big red flag. But I was young, she was young, and our parents weren't around that much. And that kind of thing was never talked about in our family."

Close, the People's Choice winner at the 2015 WebMD Health Hero Awards, always felt protective of Jessie, who is 6 years younger. But she didn't always have the opportunity to act on those protective instincts. In 1954, when Jessie was a baby, their father, a surgeon, joined a cult called Moral Re-Armament and uprooted his wife and four children to the group's headquarters in Switzerland, where the family lived in a hotel.

"I was always fascinated and charmed by Jessie. She had such imagination; she was so funny and original. I guess I kind of considered myself her guardian. But when we were in that big hotel, we were all in different rooms, and you don't live together like you do when you're in a family. I was with her but not 'with her,' you know? So Jess really fell through the cracks."

Sister Struggles

During the next few decades, Jessie Close's life became increasingly turbulent. She began drinking heavily and doing drugs in her teens. She had five failed marriages, three children, and lots of affairs. "I had my first psychotic break when I was 21," Jessie recalls. "I was living in Washington, D.C., and going to school. I felt this prickling on my scalp and I turned around and looked, and I was sitting on my bed looking at me. It scared me so much I couldn't leave the apartment until I ran out of food."

But despite the family's history of mental illness -- one uncle had schizophrenia and another committed suicide -- no one realized that Jessie might be struggling with her own mental illness until she was diagnosed with bipolar disorder in 2004, at the age of 51. By then, she had come within inches of taking her own life.

"It was New Year's Eve 2001," she says. "I was really drunk, and that was when the urges to kill myself became impossible to ignore. My husband was asleep, all my kids were home in bed, and I went out to his truck and his gun was there, and I was just going to be done with it. With my life."

But then I all of a sudden pictured my children's faces and realized what they would have to deal with if they found me. It would be a lifelong curse."
She found the strength to quit drinking and started going to Alcoholics Anonymous -- but "the bipolar disorder continued its nasty work in my brain."

Three years later, the sisters were visiting their parents when Jessie pulled Glenn aside as she was about to leave. "I told her that I had a voice in my head, telling me to kill myself over and over again," she recalls. "The week after that, I was at McLean Hospital in Boston. My sister takes things in hand." (The Harvard-affiliated psychiatric hospital was the setting for Susanna Kaysen's memoir, Girl, Interrupted, and Sylvia Plath's novel, The Bell Jar.)

It's taken time, and many adjustments to her medications, but today, Jessie successfully manages her illness and travels the country speaking about mental health.

Even though Glenn stepped in and made sure her sister got the help she needed, she says she didn't yet fully understand what Jessie had gone through. "There are a lot of things I didn't learn about, really, until I read the galley's of her book," Glenn says. (Resilience: Two Sisters and a Story of Mental Illness was published in January 2015.) "We didn't have a tradition of checking up on each other -- that wasn't one of the tools in our toolbox. What you have as a child is what your caregivers give you."

Glenn says she has forgiven her parents for any blame that anyone from the outside might expect her to assign them. "They were dealing with things I understand very deeply. They had their own lack of tools in their toolbox. Things can go from generation to generation until somebody says, 'Wait. Let's stop.'"

Jessie's own struggle was difficult enough. Even harder was watching her son, Calen Pick, battle schizoaffective disorder -- a combination of schizophrenia and mood disorder symptoms. He, too, spent time in McLean Hospital, nearly 2 years, before getting his disease under control.

"He used to be the leader of the pack. He was drop-dead gorgeous, and the girls just flung themselves at him," Jessie recalls. "But when it became evident he had a mental illness, everyone was out of there. I said to Glenn, 'Never give me another birthday or Christmas present. Just do something about the stigma and prejudice toward those of us who have mental illness.'"

**Call to Action**

Jessie's plea inspired Glenn to launch Bring Change 2 Mind (BC2M) in 2010, a U.S.-based nonprofit organization working to change attitudes about mental illness through public education and partnerships. She assembled an advisory team of scientific experts in mental illness who help design and evaluate BC2M's programs. "Goodwill for goodwill's sake isn't enough. We have to evaluate what we're doing," Glenn says. "We need to know if we've made real change, if we've moved the needle."

"The No. 1 challenge in mental health care is stigma," says one of BC2M's scientific advisers, Stephen P. Hinshaw, PhD, author of The Mark of Shame: Stigma of Mental Illness and an Agenda for Change. "It's because of the rather 'unspeakable' nature of mental illness that funding levels for research and treatment remain low." States have cut more than $1.6 billion in general funds from their state mental health agency budgets for mental health services since 2009, according to the National Alliance on Mental Illness.

"People know more about mental illness than they did decades ago -- surveys have shown that," Hinshaw says. "But at the same time, attitudes including 'social distance' -- how close you might want to be to someone with mental illness -- have not budged."
BC2M has developed a series of public service announcements about mental illness, appearing everywhere from bus-stop shelters and taxicabs to Yahoo!, Sports Illustrated, and TV Guide. Calen, Jessie, and Glenn appeared together in one of the PSAs, "Schizo," a powerful video that opens like a horror film and ends with the family together in the kitchen.

The latest campaign, "Stronger Than Stigma," features the unique challenges that men face when talking about mental health. On print ads and billboards -- like one towering above the ads for Broadway shows Matilda and Kinky Boots in New York City's Times Square -- a multiracial group of men declare, "We're talking about mental health. Are you?"

BC2M is also now piloting a new peer-to-peer "college-toolbox project" at Indiana University (IU), designed to change attitudes about mental illness (with the hashtag #stigmasucks). Glenn, very hands-on with the organization, went to the campus this year to hear presentations from students who had set up campus-wide activities and events aimed at reducing stigma.

"The winners were three girls who came up with a big campus kickball tournament called Kick Stigma in the Balls," she laughs. Once the program has matured at IU, BC2M will package, market, and distribute it free of charge to interested colleges and universities nationwide.

The organization aims even younger, with LETS (Let's Erase the Stigma) BC2M, a campus club for high school students similar to a chess or drama club. An early evaluation published in 2014 found that students who participated in a LETS club for at least a semester had dramatically improved attitudes about mental illness and were more willing to befriend others with these conditions. A study will test the program's effectiveness at 27 high schools in northern California and has just launched this fall semester with thousands of students taking part.

Glenn, who starred in the long-running TV legal thriller Damages, is now shooting a new Damian Harris film, Wilde Wedding, with Patrick Stewart and her Dangerous Liaisons co-star John Malkovich. She's also preparing for a concert performance of Sunset Boulevard in London. The actress says she's had her own struggles with mild depression.

"It's something I've been aware of for a long time. It's like you spin your wheels and sometimes everything seems absolutely impossible, and I take a very low dose of an antidepressant. Since it's such an issue in my family, it's not surprising that I'd be on the spectrum of depression somewhere."

She likes to say that "mental illness is a family affair" -- and by that, she doesn't just mean family history and genetics. "It's about the support and love that anyone dealing with mental illness desperately needs from their family," she says.

"So many cultures and families don't want the neighbors to know. They think it will be a reflection on them, and that's how stigma starts."

Stop the Stigma

Learn how you can help change mind-sets about mental illness.

1. **Educate yourself.** Start with "Mental Health Myths and Facts" from the Department of Health & Human Services web site, mentalhealth.gov/basics/myths-facts.
2. **Start talking at home.** "If you have issues in your own family, have the courage to start there," Glenn says.

3. **Speak out.** "Look to my sister, who put her whole reputation on the line to help those of us who have mental illness with no thought of herself and what it might do to her career, because the prejudice is so rampant in our society," says Jessie.

4. **Choose your words.** Words like "crazy," "nuts," "schizo," and "lunatic" may seem insignificant -- but they keep the stigma going. When you talk about someone with mental illness, don't say, "He's schizophrenic," or, "She's bipolar." People are not defined by their disease. Instead, say, "He's living with schizophrenia," or, "She has bipolar disorder."

5. **Help create safe spaces.** "Are there places in your area where people with mental health issues can go for support? If there aren't, try to do something about it," Glenn says.

6. **Take the pledge.** Take BC2M's pledge to stand up against the stigma of mental illness. Then spread the word to friends, family, and others in your social networks.