# Dignity in mental health

It is a cliché to say that we live in changing times, almost as bad as saying we live in interesting times.  Both are usually followed by some expression of regret for the past, when things were better.

But actually the past was not always better, indeed most of the time it was far worse. Imagine a life without cash machines, central heating or mobile phones. OK, perhaps mobile phones are not a pure blessing.  But to be serious, so many aspects of our lives are better than even in recent memory, let alone in other centuries. As Steven Pinker memorably showed in “The Better Angels of Our Nature”, there has been a progressive decrease, not increase, in violence, killing and cruelty over the centuries. And accompanying this has also been a rise in tolerance of difference and disability. Physical imperfections are much more accepted and those bearing wounds, blemishes or obvious illnesses are encouraged not to feel embarrassed, awkward or unaccepted. We are increasingly judged on our abilities rather than disabilities, and barriers to social inclusion for many are reducing or even disappearing. But, and you knew there was going to be a but - just as you have already guessed where this is going -many people who suffer from mental ill health are still subjected to the intolerances and indignities borne of and fostered by ignorance.

Today we support World Mental Health Day and this year the theme of the day is Dignity – a word that stems from the Latin for worthiness.

Easily violated, human dignity is complex. It is dependent upon our fundamental human rights being conferred upon us: the right to be spoken to with respect, the right to be clean, the right to make decisions, be spoken to politely, to live pain-free, eat nutritious and tasty food, the right to privacy and to social inclusion, and the right to independence.

Our human rights are integral to our dignity.

Human dignity is also much more than the sum of its parts. Take away just one of our basic rights and we begin to lose our dignity. Take away more than this and we are stripped of pride, self-respect and happiness.

Poor physical health is often obvious, mental ill health less so. To the casual observer it can be invisible, but to the sufferer it can be devastating. It is not true that all of us will develop mental disorder, and nor is It true that we are all equally at risk, but it is true that it might happen to any of us.

Today is not just about giving back dignity to people with mental ill health, it is also about ensuring we don’t take it away from anyone else.

If you are reading this, you are already visiting our website. Please stay and browse a little. Take a look at our Twitter feed today to see what our friends are saying, read some of the stories of people whose lives have been touched by mental ill health and how psychiatry has helped them, and like us on Facebook, even if I am not quite sure what that means.  It doesn’t matter how you manage it, but try to find some time today to lend your support to World Mental Health Day.  And remember, you don’t have to wait another year before doing something else to support or help those with mental health problems.

9th October 2015