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Reflection

A simple gesture

Leif Gregersen 

Part of the psychiatric hospital I was once confined in was known as 9B-South. This was where problem patients went, some for years. Any nurse or ward aide could have someone transferred there for any reason. Once you were there, only a psychiatrist could get you out. The regular wards weren't much better, but anything was better than being locked in 9B-South. When you were there, you were at risk of being assaulted violently by both the staff and the other patients, and the place was old and filthy.

When I look back on my days there, two things stand out that changed how I felt about myself as a person with a mental illness. One day, the chaplain, an older Anglican priest, walked with his cane down the long hallway of my ward and we talked. As an Anglophile from way back, we had some great conversations. He told me stories about Britain and the war. When he heard I wanted to be a pilot but could never do it, according to my doctor, he told me about an English officer named Bader, who had been a pilot despite losing both legs. Once, I asked him what brought him to the ward.

'I came here to see you,' he said. I almost couldn't believe that anyone in the world would go out of their way to visit me. I had done what I thought were horrible things, plus I personally always used to shun people who had mental health issues. He not only lifted me out of depression, he renewed my faith in the world (and Britain).

The other incident was equally encouraging. A nurse who seemed to always go out of her way to help me became a friend. She would encourage me, joke with me, calm me down when needed and generally treated me more like a human being than 95% of the staff. She was present once during a review panel discussion when I tried to tell my doctor that my mental illness was a result of harsh physical and mental abuse from my alcoholic father. The doctors seemed to dismiss this and focused on what I had done without acknowledging my suffering.

On my last day in the hospital, this nurse, my friend, came up to me and told me that she understood what I was going through. She said she had gone through similar experiences and gave me phone numbers of places to get help. I suddenly felt so much better. It seemed at that time, treatment was geared towards making the patient ashamed of their illness and situation, even if it wasn't.

Small, tiny little gestures. They can mean the world to a patient. A present of a cheap portable radio, a few words of encouragement. A paperback brought from home. All of these things can go a long way towards helping a patient be med compliant and treatment compliant. From there, they can truly start to heal.

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