

Letter From the Grand Consul

Brothers and Friends,

It is February at the time of this writing and I just received a call that my brother-in-law's father killed himself. What would be going through your mind as you received a similar call? I wondered if there was something I could or should have done. I wondered what I could do to comfort the family or provide support. I then remembered this *Magazine* is about mental health and how maybe telling my story might help someone else. This issue also rejoices that thanks to generous support from Michael Ziblich, **LOUISIANA STATE 2013**, Sigma Chi is creating its Strong Arms mental health education program. I hope you will read about it and like me, be thankful we have brothers who are committed to helping others.

Some of you know that in 1999 I was diagnosed with a brain tumor. Surgery followed two weeks later and I began recovering from having my skull opened and someone poke around my brain. As I liked to joke, now I have proof as an attorney that I have a brain no matter what a judge might say. However, the process of surgery and recovery was long and stressful for me and my family. The tumor was not malignant and I am fine, but I will never forget the lessons I learned.

Not long after surgery, I began to suffer from clinical depression. Depression is not just a feeling of sadness. The chemicals in my brain were severely out of whack. In trying to explain it, I have compared it to how you might have a dream of something odd, like everyone having a pig under their arm, yet in the dream you think nothing of it. When you wake up, your first thought is along the lines of, 'Why did everyone have a pig under their arm,' but in the dream, it made perfect sense. For me and most of those I have spoken with, clinical depression is like that. Things that normally make no sense suddenly do and you feel that no one understands. People comment that a rational person would not attempt or commit suicide and they are likely correct, but someone with clinical depression or similar conditions may see it as perfectly reasonable and logical.

I began to act wildly different from the way I used to, was angry and lost interest in the things I liked, such as reading and doing things with my children. Instead, all I wanted to do was nap and feel sorry for myself. My family and friends attempted to talk with me and find out what was wrong, but I became frustrated and angry. Finally, a Fraternity brother told me about his experience with clinical depression. I insisted that I was fine and he agreed and said that all he asked was that I check with a doctor to see if medication might make me see things differently. He said he would consider it a favor if I would try so he would not worry.

I saw the doctor and got a prescription and was lucky. The first medication worked. It was like I had awoken from a dream. I remembered the things I had done and said and thought. Worst of all, I remember how those things had once made sense to me. I had even

considered suicide, although I never attempted it nor got close to attempting it. Suddenly, I understood how dangerous clinical depression was and I promised to discuss it openly.

After apologizing to my family and friends, I began to watch for symptoms of clinical depression. I am not a trained professional, but I can share my experience and encourage others to doubt their infallibility and see if medication can work. If it doesn't, they lose nothing but time. Most of the time I have shared my experience and someone has taken my advice, though, the person came back and told a story similar to mine, where they realized how close to the abyss they were.

When someone breaks their arm, there is no stigma attached to having a cast. Unfortunately, people, especially men, have a stigma if they consider that they may need mental health help. I believe a lot of it comes from playing sports where we were always told to "walk it off" or "be tough." Clinical depression is not something that can be walked off, nor does it reflect whether someone is tough. A person with clinical depression or similar conditions may push back when people try to help them. But we owe it to our brothers to try everything we can to help.

Strong Arms will be a step in educating undergraduates on mental health. You will likely encounter someone who needs to address his mental health. I implore you to urge him to seek trained help. You should not try to diagnose or argue with him; rather, let him know you are concerned and give him encouragement. You should let him know that you will do what you can to help without judgment.

Every year, I receive word of brothers who have committed suicide and the chapters are usually surprised because they say there were no warning signs. I believe there were, but no one wanted to notice them and confront the brother exhibiting them. With education, we can learn the signs and be the change that has to happen to hopefully prevent suicide.

Please learn about Strong Arms and anticipate its launch next fall. You never know if someone you encourage to learn about it might be the person who will help if you experience mental health issues. I hope and pray that no one ever gets that call that a brother or family member has committed suicide, even though I know it will happen. But as Sigma Chis we expect more, and our brothers, family and friends deserve more.

Expect more,

Tommy Geddings, **SOUTH CAROLINA 1985**
70TH GRAND CONSUL



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