

Chairman Murphy, Ranking Member DeGette, and Members of the Subcommittee:

My journey with mental illness began in 1998 during my freshman year at Harvard University. That fall I experienced my first terrifying panic attack. In that episode, I experienced heart palpitations, sweaty palms and dizziness, yet I did not know that it was an anxiety-induced state. What I did know however, was the deep terror I felt.

My journey continued when I had my first manic episode. During the spring of 1999, I roamed the streets of Hempstead, NY possessed with a prophetic delusion that I had to share with any and every one I met. Concerned, my parents sent me to my father's homeland, Grenada, to relax and be with family. However, while there, I plunged into a deep depression. I returned to Harvard that fall and struggled through the year battling anxiety and depression.

In the spring of 2000, I was consumed by my second manic episode. My next two weeks were filled with sleepless nights and endless writing sessions. I showered less frequently and ate sporadically. During this manic episode, I experienced psychosis; I had visions of Jesus, heard cars talking and "spoke" foreign languages. Upon hearing my condition, my parents rushed to pick me up from Harvard's campus. That same evening, my parents decided to take me to a psychiatric hospital in Queens. When we arrived to the emergency room, I was taken to the triage area. Over the next few hours, I was held in a curtained room in the ER. I tossed, turned and remained restless, as now I had not slept in 24 hours. My parents sat in the curtained room with me until I was admitted to the hospital later that night.

Accompanied by two hospital aides, I was transported to the psychiatric ward in a hospital van. I walked through the dimly lit ward door and was met by approximately 6 staff. They gave me a hospital gown, requested I change into it, and encouraged me to relax when they noted my agitated state. When I continued to toss, the staff stated they were going to put straps around my arms and legs. After placing the straps, they then said they were going to give me a sedative to help me sleep. I felt a prick on my upper arm.

The next morning I awoke, drowsy and unable to speak. I walked to the common room on the ward, sat down and began to hold my breath. I received another sedative. I was hospitalized for two weeks. The first week is a blur due to my mental confusion and the psychiatric medication administered to me. However, I do remember some of my experiences. I interacted frequently with staff and the other patients. One staff member I felt an affinity toward and frequently spoke him. He advised to focus on getting better and to not come back to the hospital as so many other patients had. My psychiatrist diagnosed me with bipolar disorder and briefly explained that I would be on several medications. Upon my release from the hospital I found and met with a Brooklyn-based psychiatrist.

During my hospitalization, I accepted my illness and began my arduous road to recovery. I cannot pinpoint what triggered my immediate acceptance, but I am grateful it did not take years for me to obtain insight. Over the course of my 16 year journey with mental illness, I have simultaneously embraced my diagnosis and realized that I am more than the label. I have embraced that I am more than medication, therapist appointments and support groups. I have learned that I am not "bipolar," I am Hakeem Rahim, and not just any one piece of my treatment regimen. At the same time, I have learned that a good

treatment regimen has to be accompanied by positive coping skills – diet, exercise for brain health, along with spirituality for spiritual perspective.

The biggest challenge I faced getting to where I am now was openly acknowledging my mental illness. For so long, I felt a deep personal shame for having bipolar disorder. This personal shame was so entrenched that I even felt uncomfortable sharing my diagnosis with close friends. In 2012, I decided to speak openly and joined NAMI's In Our Own Voice program. Through the In Our Own Voice program, and have shared my story with over 600 people including individuals living with mental illness and their family members. Currently, I am NAMI Queens/Nassau's Let's Talk Mental Illness presenter. Through the Let's Talk Mental Illness presentation I have shared my story and provided much needed awareness to over 4,500 high school and middle school students at 37 schools. I see the importance in and will continue to speak up for mental health and mental illness education in schools and beyond.

Millions of people in America desire to give voice to their struggles, but cannot because of the stigma. I am fueled by the desire to break the silence. I am inspired by students who want to learn about mental illness to help a friend or a struggling parent who is hurting. I am strengthened by people who have decided to "out" themselves in an effort to normalize having a mental illness. Mental illness education and awareness is essential to combat stigma, end suffering and to normalize seeking help. It is my hope that the ideas put forward today transform the already shifting conversation around mental illness.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Hakeem Rahim".

Hakeem Rahim
Mental Health Educator, Speaker and Advocate