**Revisiting Disclosure**



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I opened [this series](https://chroniclevitae.com/news/tags/Life%20of%20the%20Mind%20Interrupted) with a piece called “[Disclosure Blues](https://chroniclevitae.com/news/546-disclosure-blues-should-you-tell-colleagues-about-your-mental-illness),” in which I concluded that it would be “hard for me to suggest that graduate students, contingent faculty, or pre-tenure faculty disclose their mental illnesses to their academic colleagues.” The risks of such disclosure were just too great.

Since I wrote that piece, much has changed in my life. [I’ve left academia](https://chroniclevitae.com/news/939-losing-my-affiliation). I’ve also taken more steps to publicly disclose my own psychiatric disability, mostly in [online essays](http://katieroseguestpryal.com/2015/04/17/unexpected-ways/). In the wake of those disclosures, I’ve experienced some trolling and other abuse, but not that much. I liberally use the “block” function on Twitter, and I’ve left all comments on my blog disabled.

But now more than ever, academics — especially contingent instructors, early career faculty, or graduate students — come to me for advice about managing the effects of their own psychiatric disabilities on their careers. The more open I’ve become about my condition, the more others have sought me out as a resource. For that reason alone, disclosure has been a valuable choice for me.

After all, if I can serve as a positive model in which one’s mental health (a) isn’t a source of shame or (b) isn’t shoved aside, but rather is a central part of one’s health and well being, then I’m glad to take a little flack from ignorant trolls who are really just afraid of people with psychiatric disabilities and express that fear with anger.

**Finally Free to Write**

Now that I’ve left the academy, one of the most amazing things about disclosing my mental illness is that I have the opportunity to research and write about my expertise in disability studies. Academia never offered me any financial or professional support to do that during my time as a contingent faculty member.

I worked for seven years as a writing instructor at an institution that contractually stated it would never hire me onto the tenure track. During that time, I was expected to teach my writing courses, grade stacks of papers, and conference with students multiple times each semester — all things that writing instructors know we must do to just keep up with the workload. But just because my institution crammed my time full of writing courses (and I added extra ones on other campuses to make ends meet) doesn’t mean my research agenda up and died. I made time to research and write about psychiatric disability. I have two, maybe three, more articles coming out this year — pieces I wrote and submitted on the academic publishing timeline when I was still teaching. (That timeline is, as you know, really, really slow.) But no institution I ever worked at supported my research in any way with time or money.

Although I miss the classroom, I don’t miss being expected to robotically fulfill teaching requirements that my institution seemed to think could be met by whichever warm body walked through the door. I don’t miss the way it treated my research as a “distraction.” That life was the opposite of the life of the mind.

The irony is, back when I was teaching, I was terrified to disclose my psychiatric disability to anyone on the campus. My fears were many. There was, of course, the general expectation of mental perfection that all academics face, and the attendant desire of those of us with mental-health issues to hide our “broken brains.” But I also struggled with a fear particular to contingent faculty — namely that, as I wrote in [my first column,](https://chroniclevitae.com/news/546-disclosure-blues-should-you-tell-colleagues-about-your-mental-illness) “everyone at work would learn about my secret disability, and that I would get fired because of it.” I was also afraid of causing trouble as a person with a disability, in particular a person with a stigmatized psychiatric condition. I would [never have asked for accommodations](https://chroniclevitae.com/news/809-rough-accommodations).

Given that new research shows that [precarious academic employment itself is a risk factor](http://journal.frontiersin.org/article/10.3389/fpsyg.2014.00701/full) for mental illness, it seems like a terrible idea for someone with a psychiatric disability to take a contingent teaching job. Too bad for seven years I never felt like [I had a choice](http://www.hybridpedagogy.com/journal/a-lecturers-almanac/).

Now that I’ve left academia behind, not only have those fears fallen away (well, for the most part), but I now can devote myself to writing about disability studies, my area of specialty that I rarely had time for before.

**Putting Disclosure to Work**

Disability studies is a youngish field that constantly examines the issue of disclosure.

In [her 2014 article](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/07350198.2014.856730) in *Rhetoric Review* on “disclosing disability in academic writing,” Stephanie L. Kerschbaum suggests that my disability cat was probably out of the bag anyway. When “you do disability studies work, people assume that you either have a disability or that you are related to someone with a disability.” She’s not wrong. When I present on disability studies at conferences, I am often asked about my own relationship with these issues.

When scholars in the field face personal questions about their own disability status, Kerschbaum wonders, do those questions “reflect a kind of invasive curiosity about disability?”

Some queries *do* come from vulture-like questioners wanting to dig into your disabled body, she writes. But she also points out positive reasons to disclose disability — even in the context of *academic* writing (let alone in less-formal writing such as opinion-based journalism) — that would give the writer *more* agency rather than less.

One reason she offered caught my eye in particular. Disclosure, she wrote, can provide “counternarratives that contest, resist, or challenge prevailing cultural assumptions about disability.” In other words — as critical race theory, critical race feminism, and feminism have been observing for decades — telling your story in your own words is a great way to rebut someone else telling your story for you, and telling it wrongly.

**Revisiting Disclosure: Whose Burden?**

But when telling your story includes discussing a highly stigmatized mental illness that [would cause a majority of people to eye you with fear](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1508784/), what then? Do you disclose and allow your narrative to prove that you are not what the stigmatized stereotype says that you are? Do you let your testimony prove to the world that you are fully human and deserve to be treated humanely?

I don’t know if disclosure can do all of this rhetorical work. Sometimes that seems like too great of a burden for one’s words to bear.

Perhaps the burden shouldn’t be on people with mental-health issues to tell our stories for others to examine. Instead, perhaps we should all be asking ourselves some questions, like: When students or colleagues disclose that they have a psychiatric disability and need accommodations, what is our gut-level reaction? Is it one of sympathy? Or do we feel resentment that this person gets special treatment? Are we afraid of, or annoyed by, their quirks — that is, by the manifestations (if any) of their disabilities?

Or do we embrace the difference they bring to our departments and classrooms?

I’m willing to bet that “embracing difference” is not the common response. I’m willing to make that bet because of my own experiences, because of the reactions I get from my writing, and because of how colleagues (well, former colleagues) talk about mental illness when they don’t know who is paying attention.

So to my nontenured colleagues with psychiatric disabilities: Don’t disclose, not yet. Let your counterparts with tenure handle this campaign for a while. Or leave it to people like me who are beyond the academic chopping block.



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- See more at: https://chroniclevitae.com/news/1047-revisiting-disclosure?cid=VTEVPMSED1#sthash.FjIHVRPc.dpuf