



# MENTAL ILLNESS

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# BODY + SPIRIT

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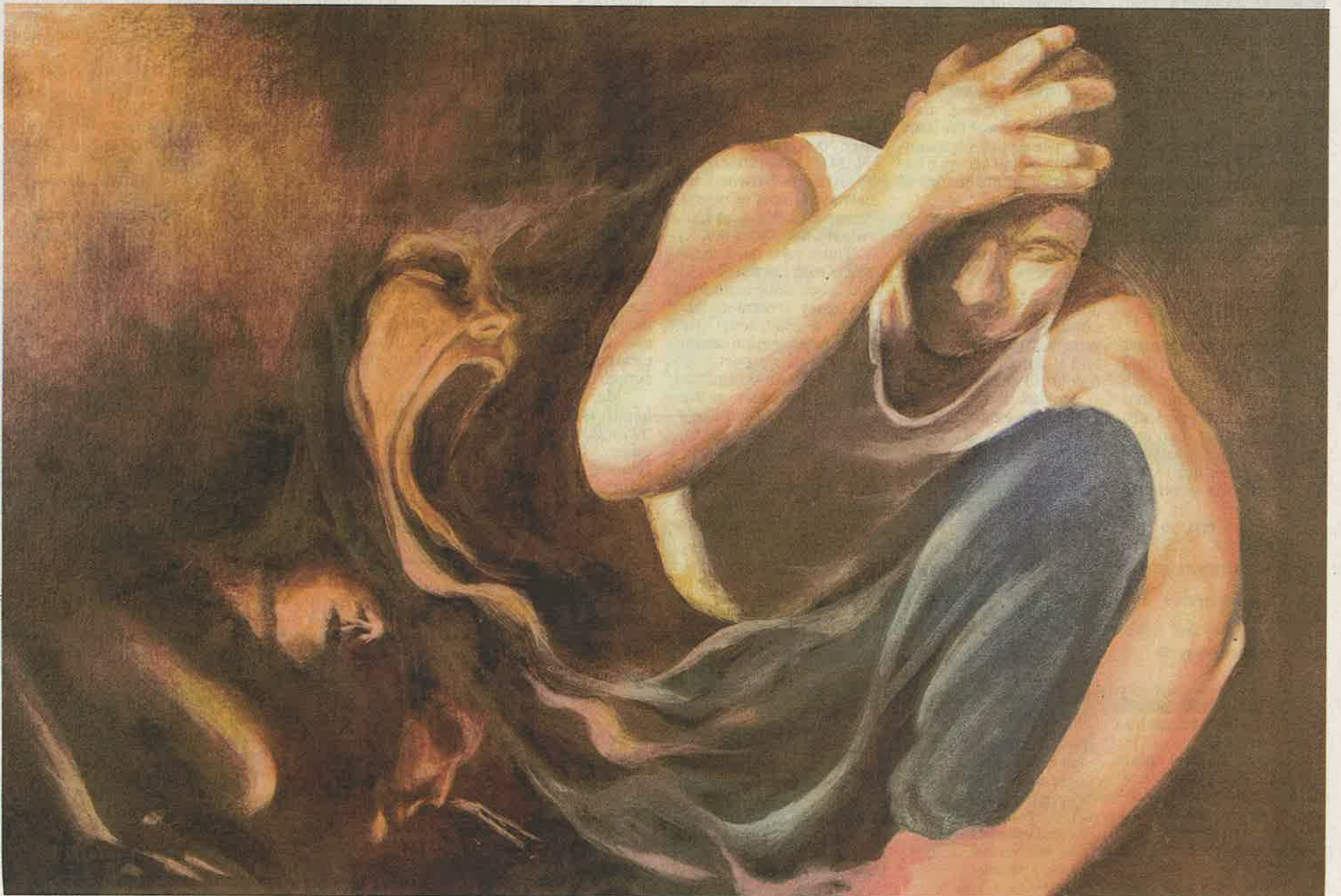


PHOTO COURTESY AMBER CHRISTIAN OSTERHOUT

# LET'S TALK

## New book highlights the need for more communication surrounding mental illness



CHRIS LACHALL/COURIER-POST

Dr. Rachel Pruchno's memoir sheds light on the impact mental illness has had on her family. Above, Amber Christian Osterhout's experience with her brother's mental illness prompted her to raise awareness for the disease through her artwork.

By Eric Herr For the Courier-Post

As director of research at The New Jersey Institute for Successful Aging at Rowan University, Dr. Rachel Pruchno studies all aspects of the aging process.

Of particular interest are issues centered around mental health and how those issues can affect families.

"Despite many medical advances, there is still a horrible stigma associated with mental illness and a tendency to somehow blame the family or blame the parents for not doing a better job in recognizing the warning signs," observes Pruchno.

Indeed, Pruchno knows all too well about that stigma, because her mother and later, her adopted daughter, were both diagnosed with mental disorders.

She shares her firsthand account about coping with such news and the impact mental illness has had on her family, in a self-published book called "Surrounded by Madness, a Memoir of Mental Illness and Family Secrets."

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## Talk

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"My mother was diagnosed with manic depression when I was about 12 years old and I remember that it came as a complete shock to all of us," explains Pruchno, whose mother was in her early 40s at the time.

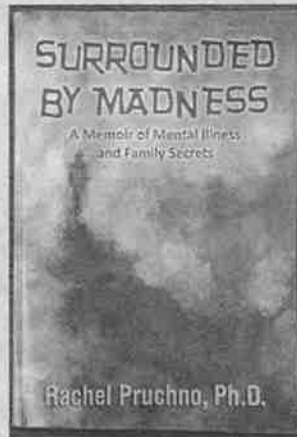
"We were perplexed as to what might have triggered it and since the doctors didn't share any information, we really had no choice as a family but to deal with things as best we could and keep her condition secret," she recalls. Her mother's mood swings from high to low and anywhere in between would change with the seasons.

A second devastating blow would come 10 years later, when Pruchno's mother committed suicide.

Pruchno, then a senior at Michigan State, admits she knew from the age of 16 her mother was going to kill herself, it was just a question of when.

"Mental illness wasn't something you talked about 40 or 50 years ago, so I would tell people that I met long after her death that my mother died in a car accident," reflects Pruchno. She stuck to that story until she wrote her book.

Fast forward to the



early 1990s, when Pruchno, now married with a doctorate in human development, decided to adopt a child after experiencing fertility issues.

The couple, after doing extensive research on adoption, decided they would not accept the baby of a drug addict, for example, but would accept a baby with a family history of mental illness.

As a trained professional, Pruchno decided she could handle that challenge.

She and her husband, Josh, have two adopted children — a son, a freshman at Rowan University and a daughter, who has bipolar disorder.

Stories like Pruchno's reflect the magnitude and pervasiveness of mental illness.

The cover of Dr. Pruchno's book, is a replica of a painting inspired by artist Amber Christian Oster-

hout, whose brother suffers from mental illness.

Osterhout's experience prompted her to become an advocate for mental illness through her themed artwork, which depicts the disease's many stark realities.

Sobering statistics from the Virginia-based National Alliance on Mental Health underscore the need to make the topic a much more public conversation.

For instance, approximately 62 million Americans, or one in four adults, experiences mental illness in a given year.

In addition, half of all mental illness begins by the age of 14; three-quarters by age 24.

Moreover, despite effective treatment availability, The National Alliance on Mental Health (NAMH) estimates it can be decades between the first symptoms of mental illness and when an individual finally gets help.

Those who need assistance with mental health and other issues can turn to Legacy Treatment Services, a multi-level 24/7 crisis intervention center, based in Hainesport.

It is a state-designated screening center representing Burlington County. Other centers representing other counties receive the same designation through The New Jersey Department of Human Services, Divi-

sion of Mental Health.

"Ninety percent of the calls we receive are from family members looking for help for a loved one. Whether it's immediate crisis intervention related to mental illness, general information, or finding a place that they can turn to for specialized assistance, we are available anytime, day or night," explains Christine Kirkbride, Legacy's vice president of emergency services.

In the last two years, Kirkbride says, calls related to crisis intervention have increased significantly, especially among young adults.

At the other end of the spectrum, as Baby Boomers age, the likelihood of those suffering from Alzheimer's, dementia and other mental disorders is on track to increase dramatically.

Moorestown-based Bayada Home Health Care, which currently serves 21,000 clients in 22 states, is expanding their scope of home health services to include specially trained psychiatric nurses who can identify and treat mental health related issues, plus give support to families.

"Many times, mental health issues are not immediately apparent, especially to family and friends, so it takes a trained professional to recognize symptoms, especially in the early

stages," observes company president Mark Baia-da, whose younger brother, Martin, suffers from schizophrenia.

Former New Jersey Governor Richard Codey, a staunch mental health advocate for many years, created a Mental Health Task Force during his tenure as Acting Governor, back in 2003.

More recently, he and his wife Mary Jo, who struggled with severe bouts of postpartum depression, have set up a fund to raise money for mental health related initiatives.

"If you mention cancer, heart disease, diabetes, ALS, or any number of other diseases, people immediately rally around the cause, but mental illness never seems to get the recognition and exposure it deserves," observes Codey.

In Pennsylvania, Republican Congressman Tim Murphy is leading the charge, with a proposed bill that would not only improve outpatient treatment programs, but also allow the parents of adult children with mental illness to speak with their physician and empower them to have a voice in making treatment decisions.

"I have heard from thousands of parents who call, write and email me, describing in painful detail how the mental health system has failed their

families, their loved ones, and is a barrier to recovery. The Helping Families in Mental Health Crisis Act (HR-3717) gives those families the tools needed to help a severely mentally ill loved one access the medical treatment and care they need so tragedy is averted, and their son or daughter can recover and lead fulfilling lives," adds Murphy, who is also a clinical psychologist.

Murphy conducted a year-long investigation of the mental health system as chairman of the House Energy and Commerce Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations beginning in January 2013, following the Sandy Hook Elementary School tragedy in Newtown, Conn.

As for Pruchno, sharing her story, forwarding initiatives about mental illness, and getting rid of the stigma associated with it will always be at the top of her agenda.

"I wrote my book because there are so many people who think they're the only ones dealing with mental illness and the reality is, they're not. It's always important to find a confidant and share stories, however difficult to talk about, with others," says Pruchno.

"We all need to keep the discussion going to affect positive change and remember to support each other in the process."