In 2010, and after being in business school for two years in our home country of Kuwait, my twin sister, Alaa and I, decided to transfer to the United States to pursue a degree in psychology. While this decision is a common career choice for students in Western societies, it is atypical for Kuwaiti students. We received discouragement and a lot of negative reactions from neighbors, friends, and family members. They told us that we would be hurting our reputation by choosing a stigmatized profession and wasting our intelligence. We realized that if this is how Kuwaiti society reacted to us as future psychologists, the experience must be far worse for people who suffer from mental illnesses. Alaa and I also realized we were merely experiencing a symptom of a bigger problem: The stigma and negative perceptions of mental illness in Kuwait are overwhelming.

**Stigma of Mental Illness in Kuwait**

The stigma of mental illness is not unique to Kuwaiti society. It is universal, occurring in most countries, in varying degrees (Murthy, 2002). One in four people will suffer from a mental disorder during the course of their lifetime and currently, more than 450 million
people suffer from mental disorders worldwide (Mathers, 2008; World Health Organization, 2004). Almost all of these individuals face a degree of stigma and discrimination from their neighbors, friends, and even their own families (Corrigan et al., 2014). Employers have been known to refuse to hire people with mental illnesses; some landlords have rejected them as tenants; and some residents have made living within a neighborhood difficult to tolerate (Farina, 1974; Stuart, 2006).

Kuwait is a country located in the Middle East. As an Arabic-Muslim country, it is characterized by its collectivist and conservative culture as well as its Muslim beliefs. Kuwait’s culture impacts its traditions, customs, and its people’s behaviors. More importantly, it also impacts the manifestation of mental illnesses, help seeking behavior, and the stigma attached to the mental health field. In my experience, in Eastern, collectivist, and conservative societies, the stigma of mental illness has an amplified effect. It is typical that people with mental illness are unable to gain employment, finish school, marry, live independently, or have their treatment paid for by insurance companies (Patel et al., 2006). In Kuwait, the stigma is thought to “taint” the family’s reputation and stature within the community. Many people with mental illness are hidden in their homes by relatives, who discourage them from seeking treatment. In addition, due to local perceptions of religious and supernatural causes of psychiatric symptoms, people with mental illness are often accused of satanic possession or of having a weak faith in God. This perspective may subject them to ineffective and often harmful treatments such as exorcisms (Soh & Walter, 2012).
The stigma of mental illness in Eastern and Western societies often results from a lack of knowledge about the true nature of mental illness. Inaccurate images portrayed in the media (Wedding, Boyd, & Niemiec, 2010; Robinson, 2003) and incorrect word-of-mouth comments passed down through generations, have long been sources of misinformation about mental illness. In Kuwait, mental illness is a taboo topic and people are often discouraged from talking about it at all. Consequently, many people are at high risk for believing exaggerations and falsities about mental illnesses.

The experience of having a mental illness, such as depression or schizophrenia, is very different from having a physical illness, such as cancer or diabetes. When someone has diabetes, no one would ever tell them to “tough it out” and discontinue their insulin; if someone has a broken leg, no one would tell them to “just walk it off.” Whereas people with mental illnesses, may be told to “tough it out” or “get over it” (Riecke, 2015). In my experience, unfortunately, many hold the perception that physical illnesses are thought to be real health problems whereas mental illnesses are not.

**SPEAK: Combating the Stigma of Mental Illness in Kuwait**

In 2011, my sister and I decided to give a voice to the neglected topic of mental illness and mental health in Kuwait. We wanted to promote the rights of people with a mental illness, and most importantly, create a source of accurate information about mental health that would be readily accessible. We established the first and only anti-stigma campaign, at the time, in Kuwait that is customized for a largely religious, socially conservative, and collectivist society.
Our bilingual (English/Arabic) campaign, “Standing for Psychological Education and Awareness in Kuwait” or SPEAK (www.facebook.com/SPEAKuwait), has the following goals:

- Reduce the stigma of mental illness;
- Elevate the status of the field of mental health;
- Promote the rights of people with a mental illness to be full members of society and have access to high-quality treatment;
- Advocate for the public/institutional recognition of the fields of psychology and psychiatry as important health fields and professional careers; and
- Strive for excellence in mental health care, education, and research.

Our slogan is *End the Psy-lence*. “Psy-lence” is a term we coined that combines the words *psychology* and *silence*. It refers to ending the secrecy and fear that surrounds the highly stigmatized topic of mental illness and mental health.

Why do we highlight mental illness and mental health in Kuwait? The more Kuwaitis are aware of it and address it, the more it becomes part of everyday conversations and cannot be ignored, hidden, or stigmatized. Mental illness and mental health will no longer be taboo subjects.

Increasingly, mental illness is an issue that Kuwaiti society must confront and provide evidence-based services. Kuwaitis with mental illness must be able to access mental health care as they do for physical health issues. Once the conversation starts, people living with mental illness will know that they are not alone, whether it is the comfort of
knowing that there are others out there who are going through the same thing, or, knowing that people around them accept them and support them. Speaking up will create an honest, tolerant, and accepting society in which people who have or who will have a mental illness will not fear the judgment of people and can speak out about their issues and challenges.

**Conclusion**

We live in a virtual world, so talking about mental health and mental illness could be accomplished by texting, blogging, or tweeting. We initiated our campaign around the same time as the Arab Spring, when we realized the power of social media. We observed how the united voice of the people and the strength of their demands revolutionized societies and impacted governmental change. It was the public who created change, not policy makers or government officials. Similarly, we all have a part to play in the fight against the stigma of mental illness globally. It is time to stand up and SPEAK up.


