

BRANDON MARSHALL SPEECH, U.S. SENATE FINANCE COMMITTEE, 4/28/16

Thank you Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Wyden, and members of the lead witness committee. I'm grateful for the opportunity to speak before the U.S. Senate Finance Committee on an issue which not only affects me, but millions of people across America: the impact of stigma in the mental health community, and the critical need to make it easier for people to get assessed and treated and be able to lead a normal, fulfilled life.

My name is Brandon Marshall – father, husband, son, friend, a man of faith, wide receiver in the NFL, and co-founder with my wife Michi Marshall of the nonprofit PROJECT 375. Our mission is to end the stigma surrounding mental illness, fostering open dialogue that encourages people to recognize symptoms and seek help.

As a public figure, my actions have been in the spotlight for years, both on the gridiron and off. I was diagnosed with Borderline Personality Disorder in 2011. Before then, as many people may know, my life was a living hell. Yet I didn't know why. It was hard to control my emotions and manage my life effectively, and the situation was only magnified by the tough-it-up culture of football.

For me, the tipping point came when I became so isolated and depressed that I stopped talking to my wife and family. I descended further and further, but it simply felt like the new normal. What the tabloid headlines said wasn't the true reality of my suffering – the isolation and depression were.

Finally, I was persuaded to visit McLean Hospital near Boston and got evaluated in a supportive environment where I felt people actually understood me. Just getting the diagnosis made me feel 50 percent better. And getting the right treatment plan transformed my life.

Why did it take so long to get help? The biggest factor was the stigma surrounding mental illness. I saw how ashamed others felt. This was what motivated me and my wife to launch PROJECT 375. The journey I went through was difficult. I wanted to help others take that first step, the hardest one to take. By many accounts, I am the first public figure to stand up and publicly admit to the world a diagnosis of BPD. Going public was hard. It's no less hard for others struggling with undiagnosed mental illness.

In football there's stats – lots of them. People obsess over the stats. My fans can rattle off mine. Here are three:

- I hold the record for most receptions – 21 – in an NFL game.
- I'm one of only five players in NFL history to have at least 100 receptions in three seasons.
- I hold the NFL record for most Receiving Touchdowns in a single Pro Bowl game.

In the realm of football, those numbers are impressive. But there are other stats that should make more of an impression on everyone here today. Here are 10 of them:

- 1 in 3 people will experience a psychiatric disease in their lifetime.
- Over 60 million Americans are afflicted by mental illness during any one year.
- The suicide rate has risen over 24% since 1999, making mental illness one of the only illnesses that has seen an increase in mortality rates.
- An estimated 17 million youth in the U.S. live with a psychiatric disorder, more than the number of children with cancer, diabetes and AIDS combined.
- Anxiety disorders are the most common mental illness, affecting close to 18% of adults in the U.S.

- Among the 20 million American adults who experience a substance use disorder, more than 50% have a co-occurring mental illness.
- Nearly 8% of Americans will experience PTSD at some point in their lives. People who suffer from PTSD are 9 times more likely to experience issues of drug and alcohol abuse and dependence.
- Mental illness is associated with increased occurrence of chronic diseases such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, obesity, asthma, epilepsy and cancer.
- According to the American Psychiatric Association, while awareness of mental illness is increasing in the U.S., there is a worsening shortage of psychiatrists.
- One silver lining: Many Americans do not understand that common mental illnesses can be successfully treated most of the time, including a 70 to 80% success rate for treatment of depression.

The prevalence of mental illness in the U.S. is reflected across society: from homelessness to incarceration to suicide. Often it goes unreported, or simply unnoticed, until it claims the life of a well-known figure, such as Robin Williams. The stigma surrounding mental health issues is our last great fight on this frontier.

Ask yourself: Would you feel ashamed being diagnosed with cancer? No, of course not. With the first symptoms you'd get diagnosed and treated, whether through surgery, radiation or chemotherapy. Would you be afraid you'd be fired from your job if you were diagnosed with HIV/AIDS? We've conquered that frontier – the answer is no. However, many people still wonder: Are you sure you won't be fired if you're diagnosed with Bipolar II or BPD? Would your child be invited to a birthday party or sleepover if he or she is diagnosed with anxiety disorder, OCD, or maybe schizophrenia?

A staggering 75% of those who need help do not seek it because of the stigma. Because they fear what others may think, and how it may negatively impact them. Without help and treatment the consequences are dire – unemployment, incarceration, substance abuse, and even death. According to Dr. Scott Rauch of McLean hospital and a board member of PROJECT 375, people are still hiding in corners, avoiding treatment, fearful of being labeled, afraid of losing their jobs.

I founded PROJECT 375 with my wife out of our shared pain – and an understanding that millions of others could be helped by my stepping into the light. Talking about my BPD was liberating, but it was also scary – because of the stigma, I could have lost everything. Every time we release a video, send a tweet or publish a post, we hear from people who were inspired to finally take that step forward, to seek help, and to share their story.

We need to provide health coverage for brain illnesses in the same way we would any other physical illness or, in other words, treat the brain like we would any other organ in the body, making “Check Up from the Neck Up” part of routine exams, so we normalize treatment of mental health and addiction. We must accept mental illness as a disease, and like any other disease, it needs better research, screening and funding. We need better recognition of new therapeutic treatments that are proven to work. We need more robust education in schools, the enlightened support of news and entertainment media, and the advocacy of high-profile figures, like myself, willing to step forward. None of this happens if we still remain silent about these issues!

As an NFL wide receiver, I've caught hundreds of passes during my career. Today, I'm throwing one, to you. Thank you.