

Disclosing Mental Illness Among Korean Americans Is Losing Face

Organization: Korean American Story

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No matter how conspicuously present, mental illness in Korean American families is nearly always held in secrecy, often under a cloud of denial and shame.

“It would have been so much easier for my sister if we were able to speak openly about her schizophrenia and bipolar disorder,” said John Lee, not his real name, who occasionally helps his sister Jane, not her real name, who had her first episode of serious mental illness 25 years ago. His family and Jane, a medical doctor, chose not to reveal her schizophrenia to her husband before marriage, John said, citing taboo around schizophrenia as a reason. Jane’s husband did know that she had bipolar disorder because he saw her taking lithium on a regular basis. Even among Korean Americans who are educated to view health medically, mental illness is not discussed with the same level of candor one might speak about cancer, heart disease or diabetes.

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