

By Kathleen M. Pike, PhD
November 30, 2018

Five *on*
Friday

Musings on Mental Health

Ninety Years and Counting

This Monday, my dear friend, Jim Spool (AKA Grandpa Jimmy), will be ninety years old. Born on December 3, 1928, Grandpa Jimmy arrived on earth the same year that commercially available sliced bread was invented. Really. It was also in 1928 that scientist Alexander Fleming discovered a particular mold in his petri dishes that put in motion the development of penicillin.



A lot has happened in ninety years - all around the world, and in virtually every dimension of human experience, including what we know and how we think about mental health and mental illness. Here are five reflections on the subject from my conversation with Grandpa Jimmy.

1. Sliced bread & taking things for granted. Most of us cannot imagine a supermarket without rows and rows of sliced bread. We take it for granted, as the expression goes. This is true for so many aspects of our lives. Grandpa Jimmy, what do you think we take for granted today in terms of mental health?

The simple answer is that we take for granted that today we are talking about mental health. We have many more ways of communicating with each other so that subjects like mental health are being discussed and brought into conversations much more frequently than when I was a kid. Think back. When I was a kid, we had no commercial television. We listened to radio shows and had one telephone that was located in a central room in the house, not on everybody's night table.

No one talked about mental health when I was growing up. I don't remember ever having a conversation with my friends or siblings about mental health, and I don't recall ever hearing such a discussion among adults either. I'm not even sure the medical doctors were focused on and talking about mental health. (Little factoid on this is that, in fact, the World Psychiatric Association was not founded until 1950).

2. Penicillin and the slow road to public health impact. It took thirteen years for Fleming's 1928 observation in his lab to result in the 1941 mass production of this antibacterial "miracle cure" that would transform medicine. What is something about mental illness that has taken a long time to be recognized?*Post-traumatic Stress Disorder and war.*

My father was in the Russian Army, in the Russo-Japanese War in 1903 before he came to the United States. I never heard him talk about any mental health issues associated with being in war. Now he wasn't in combat on the front lines, but he was in a communications unit and he had to go to the front lines to lay communications cables, so he certainly knew what it meant to be at war.

I knew Veterans who fought in World War I and was alive during World War II. Again, I don't recall conversations about the mental health burden for men who fought in those wars. They suffered quietly and without widespread awareness by the rest of the population.

I served in the Korean War. I had eight weeks of training at Fort Dix and then I was stationed at the Pentagon. I didn't see combat, but we had plenty of officers at the Pentagon who had been in the field. No one ever talked about mental health concerns. When an artillery shell blows up at a soldier's feet or when you are a prisoner of war - these experiences have real mental health implications, but it was not until Vietnam that mental health became part of the public discourse about war. Maybe a good part of that has to do with the arrival of television and watching the war on the news each day. It was the first time that civilians could witness war up close. It was then that everyone became more aware of mental health problems associated with war. That was the first time I heard the term "post-traumatic stress disorder."

3. Technology and new opportunities. In 1928, about half of all homes in the United States had electricity. Today, about half of people around the world have access to the internet and over two-thirds have mobile phones. There is a lot of concern about the negative impact of this technology on people's mental health. What do you think?

Technological advances have changed the world in so many ways. The good news is that we have so much more available to us today to stay healthy compared to what we had when I was growing up. I think we should be encouraged about this. I would also think that this holds true for mental health issues. Technology has the potential to bring much better understanding of mental illness and improvements in treatments. Today's advances in technology and in electronic systems allow mental health experts to go more deeply into mental health problems - to understand the brain and seek solutions - much more so than when I was first eating sliced bread. We have huge opportunities. With so much more attention being paid to mental health now, the real opportunity is to use technology to achieve these advances.

4. Social connection in this age of technology. Humans are pack animals, and with all the technological changes in the world, how we connect with one another has changed profoundly over the past ninety years. In some ways we are more connected, and in some ways, we are more disconnected. In fact, lately, we have been learning a lot about loneliness and its negative impact on mental health. What can you tell me about relationships in your life and how they matter for your mental health and wellbeing?

Extremely important. One of the last things of particular note that I can remember my late wife, Helen, saying a few weeks before she passed away, to my son and his partner when they told her they were getting married was, "That's great; nobody should be alone." She was so right. Another conversation she had before she died was with my daughter, Tracy, about my living with Tracy and her family after Helen passed on. Honestly, if I were out there on my own, I don't know where I would be today. We all need to have meaningful relationships. Technology can hinder or help us connect. The key is real connection and staying connected. Being connected is essential to our being well - mentally and in every way.

5. Being present at ninety. There's lots of talk these days about mindfulness and living in the moment. What would you say is great about this moment in your life?

What's great is still being here, being active, and being able to do what I want. Growing up we spend a lot of time planning for the future. For me, the future is here. It is really important to me that I can take care of myself and contribute to my family and community. I might also mention that the old ladies are crazy about me because I can still drive at night! I don't know how long that will last, but it's great for now.

Indeed, the future is now. Thank you, Grandpa Jimmy, for your reflections on going

from sliced bread to conversations, discoveries, and technologies that are transforming what we know about mental health and mental illness. Thank you, too, for the reminders about social connection and mindfulness as steady constants in our story of wellbeing.

Grandpa Jimmy, dear friend and wise elder, Happy 90th Birthday!