

# Five on Friday

*Musings on Mental Health*

## #ProtectYourGirls

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*I generally have little patience for underwear masquerading as fashion. This past Sunday was another story. I saw bras decorated with pom poms, covered with neon paint, and layered with buttons, pipe cleaners and paper mache and wished they were being paraded down Fifth Avenue with great fanfare. These bras were the masterpieces of teen girls who entered a fundraising event to raise awareness about breast cancer.*



[Photo Credit](#)

*Breast cancer and mental illness share a lot of common ground. Here are five ways that stand out to me:*

**1. Stigma.** Fear, ignorance and shame, left unchecked, lead to stigma. So it was that in 1893 President Grover Cleveland pretended he was going on a fishing trip when in fact he was having a malignant tumor removed. Times have changed for cancer, but for too many people with mental illness, it might as well be 1893.

**2. Ignoring it doesn't make it go away.** No one celebrates when they hear they have breast cancer. The same is true for bipolar disorder or anxiety disorder or any other mental health problem. But, #protectyourgirls reminds us that we are better off taking our heads out of the sand to talk about the illnesses that threaten us - and even better off if we take action, too.

**3. Earlier is better.** Early detection is best to prevent problems from spreading. It is true for cancer. It is true for mental illness. The tumor is smaller; cancer cells have found their way to fewer places. For someone with depression, early detection increases the likelihood that the symptoms are more treatable. For someone with schizophrenia, fewer untreated episodes of psychosis predicts better outcome. Programs promoting education, early identification and screening for breast cancer can serve as a model for those of us working to do the same in mental health.

**4. Serious illness and joy can live side by side.** The girls who brought color and whimsy to their bras have mothers, grandmothers and friends who have personally known the nemesis of breast cancer. These women may have lost their breasts and their hair at some point. And some are still fighting for their lives. The indomitable spirit of these teens reminds us that communities can rally so that cancer does not also steal all joy and quality of life. The same can be true for mental illness.

**5. Rosie the Riveter.** This bra won first prize. Rosie the Riveter dates back to the Second World War, representing women who rallied during the war and kept the country running. Rosie has become a cultural icon of women's strength and empowerment. When it comes to breast cancer, when it comes to mental illness, we need the strength and conviction of Rosie the Riveter to help us push for early identification and public education, advocate for research and treatment, and navigate what can be a treacherous journey.

*Congratulations to all the teens who took their bras out from under cover to raise funds and awareness about breast cancer this week, and special kudos to Anabel Getz and the 2016 organizing committee!*

*For more information about **#ProtectYourGirls**, visit: [Facebook.com/protectyourgirls](https://www.facebook.com/protectyourgirls)*