

# Five *on* Friday

*Musings on Mental Health*

## Remembering Colin Powell

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*When I hear the name Colin Powell, I think “hero.” His death at age 84 on this past Monday, October 18th, marked the passing of a man who did much for many. He was a hero for a myriad of reasons.*



Colin Powell October 18, 2007 visit to ASIJ  
Photo credit: John O’Leary

*He is best known for his public service as the first African American U.S. Secretary of State and as the youngest and first African American Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. He was also a quiet ambassador for mental health. How?*

**1. Courage.** Colin Powell had a 35-year military career, during which he faced numerous dangers, fears, and unknowns on and off the battlefield. He confronted his health issues near the end of his life with his

characteristic resoluteness and courage. Courage is not the absence of fear. In fact, just the opposite. We see people as courageous when they model how to act responsibly despite fear, anxiety, worry, and uncertainty. Colin Powell's courage on the battlefield and at the end of his life inspire us. Courage of a similar stripe is at the core of overcoming mental ill health and addressing mental health issues. It is nothing short of an act of courage to pursue treatment for depression, substance use, trauma, and other mental health conditions or speak publicly about mental health struggles. Translating courage into action opens up possibilities whether we are talking about military or mental health battles.

**2. Overcoming Imposter Syndrome.** Colin Powell visited my children's school in 2007. It was thrilling to meet him. I still marvel at the mix of strength and humility at the core of his presence. While speaking to our school community, Powell acknowledged the psychological burden he felt as his career soared and the self-doubt and fears of "tokenism" that plagued him early in his professional life. This subjective experience of self-doubt that persists despite education, experience, and accomplishments is a well-documented psychological phenomenon. Called [imposter syndrome](#), it has profound mental health implications. Powell described that it took many years to overcome feeling like an imposter. He spoke of recognizing that he may have benefited from the national agenda to create greater opportunities for African Americans. Ultimately, he came to realize that he would never have been given command of the most powerful military in the world if he did not possess the skills required to fulfill that role.

**3. 1995 Press Conference.** "My wife has depression. She's had it for many, many years and we have told many, many people about it. It is not a family secret. It is very easily controlled with proper medication, just as my blood pressure is sometimes under control with proper medication." Colin Powell [spoke](#) matter-of-factly about his wife's depression and went on to say, "I hope that people . . . who think they might be suffering from depression make a beeline to the doctor because it is something that can be dealt with very easily." The analogy to hypertension has its limits, but Powell's clarity and calm conveyed a deep and clear recognition that we need to end the false dichotomy between mental health and other health conditions. This truth is as essential today as it was 26 years ago.

**4. Regret.** In 2003, Powell addressed the United Nations in a speech that helped pave the way for the U.S. entry into war in Iraq. As more information has come to light, critics have accused him of having advanced faulty intelligence to defend the U.S. military intervention. In subsequent years, Powell went on public record expressing his [regret](#) over his role in launching the ill-fated U.S. invasion of Iraq. It is difficult for all of us to admit mistakes, which is true in spades when the consequences are so public and significant. From a mental health perspective, owning our mistakes makes it possible to learn from them. Creating [tolerance for mistakes](#) makes room for learning and constructive self-growth — not only for a military general but for us all.

**5. In it together.** Colin Powell understood that we are inextricably connected and must strive as individuals to do what is right and good for the collective. He knew it from his military days. He knew it as he stood by his wife as she sought help for her depression. At that 1995 Press Conference, when questioned further about his wife's mental health, he went on to say, "Excuse me, sir, the person you love more than anyone is living in hell, and you don't do whatever you can to get her out? Do you have a problem with that, sir?" I wasn't there, but those in attendance said that you could hear a pin drop. The data are clear. Across the lifespan and across mental health conditions, we all do better when we have caregivers and allies who lend us strength and compassion at times when we need it most. Mental health allies at [work](#) and [school](#) are vital to creating better educated and more compassionate communities. Given the [prevalence](#) of mental disorders, we will each have many opportunities in life to stand by someone who is struggling with a serious mental health condition. May Colin Powell's example be our guide.

*As the world recalls this great military general and grieves his passing, I remember and thank Colin Powell for his service as an ally and quiet ambassador for mental health.*