



MY NAME IS MIA

Weighing just 2 pounds 14 ounces at birth, I began my life with many challenges—my mental health being my greatest challenge. **I've spent my entire life trying to adapt and overcome those challenges. During my journey, I often felt like a lost child in an abyss of darkness looking for a way out. To my surprise I did not find a way out, but a guiding light to help me through my dark times and to see my path to a brighter future.** My guiding light was my brother Chad; he was my greatest support system. A support system can be the difference between suffering alone in the darkness or shining in the light of life. My advice to anyone in need is get yourself someone you can talk to, someone you can trust.

Read more stories like Mia's at lookbeyondstigma.org/stories/



Dear Chloe,

I just got your diagnosis and my world fell apart. All the dreams and things I had planned for us are gone. I don't know how to feel or think about you having Angelman Syndrome. The doctor said that you would never walk, talk, have severe cognitive delays, health issues and they don't know what your quality of life will be. **I look at you and you are perfect to me and you are unaware of all of this as you sit on my lap and play with your binky. I want us to stay in our own world so that you can never be hurt.** I don't want people to think of you as "less than." I am angry for all of the hardships you will have to endure and how I feel that I will not be able to protect you. I am sorry that I failed you; I wish mommy could fix it but all I can do is give you all of the love I have.

*Read the rest of Chloe's story at
lookbeyondstigma.org/stories/chloes-story/*



Our Daughter Gracie

I am the mother of a 15-year-old girl who is funny, caring, helpful, witty, charming and... happens to have been diagnosed with epilepsy at age three. By the time Gracie started school, I had noticed the cognitive and fine motor changes that had occurred with increased seizures. To avoid possible stigma, Gracie, the school nurse and I read a seizure book to her classmates every year through fifth grade.

The students asked Gracie questions, which she answered. Then we explained to her classmates what they might see, such as difficulty with writing, slower at reading and maybe a little more “wobbly” on the playground. We also explained that she still wanted to do all the same activities that they were doing, such as music, reading and playing outside.

Read the rest of Gracie's story at lookbeyondstigma.org/stories/gracies-story/



My Son

I wrote this poem to express my frustration with the way that society wants to interact with my son. Often, he is treated as a collection of labels or diagnoses rather than an individual. We hear words like inclusion, accessibility and equality, but that is rarely what he experiences. He works hard every day to be the best that he can be, regardless of the labels that society has relegated to him. As his mother, I want the community to see him as I do—a fun, creative, joy-filled human being, deserving of every goal he dares to dream.

THE LABEL

This flesh I created,

**A limitless dream covered in the
skin of his ancestors,**

Has been distilled into a living toe tag,

A label...

*Finish reading Amy's poem at
lookbeyondstigma.org/stories/amy-the-label/*



My Recovery Story

Here is my recovery story: I was born in Kalamazoo, Michigan on September 15, 1981. When I was a baby, I suffered atrial septal defect of the heart and was sick for the first three years of my life... I was prone to getting sick all the time and I was held back from school. **When I first encountered stigma at an early age, I didn't understand why I was being treated this way...**

I was exposed to multiple environments that were difficult: schools, summer camps, foster homes and psychiatric establishments. When I was little, I showed interest in art and music; they have resonated in me as long as I can remember.

Finish Michael's story at lookbeyondstigma.org/stories/michaels-recovery-story/



My name is Lacey

I have been struggling with my mental health probably since before I can remember. It has taken me a long time to understand what I was going through and still struggle with. Why I always felt as though nothing made sense in this world. Why I was constantly feeling uncomfortable, as if I was a burden to everyone around me. As if I didn't belong and never would. But in this moment, I have started to realize I am a walking fallacy. I never want anyone to feel the way I have felt. As though there is no one to talk to. As though there is no hope for people to understand.

I dream that this campaign will open eyes and hearts. To let others know it's okay to talk, to be heard, to ask questions, and to listen. To be the person you wish you had when you were younger. To remind others that life will never be perfection, but life is worth the challenge.

Read Lacey's letter to her younger self at lookbeyondstigma.org/stories/laceeys-story/

YOUR MESSAGE! YOUR VOICE! YOUR STORY!

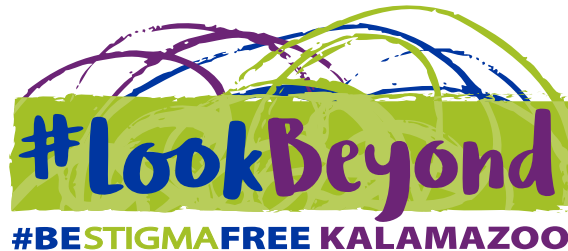
"When you stand and share your story in an empowering way, your story will heal you and your story will heal somebody else." –Iyanla Vanzant

Have you or someone you love ever experienced stigma? By telling your personal story, you can help people **#LookBeyond** their assumptions about individuals living with mental illness, substance use disorders and developmental disabilities.

Almost everyone has been touched in some way by these challenges. Here's your chance to speak out about your trials—and triumphs!—dealing with stigma. Your identity is protected: *You can use your first name or a pseudonym, and your photo is only included if you want it.*

SUBMIT A STORY ON THE STORIES PAGE:

LookBeyondStigma.org



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YOUR STORY AT**