

The rich are key players in mental illness battle

The rich are different. I know. Palm Beach is my stomping ground. All I have to do is stop at the grocery store for proof. Shoppers can valet or park their Bentleys themselves. Maids in light blue uniforms roam the aisles.

It is easy to judge them. I have wasted a lot of time doing that. Today I find it much easier and healthier to focus on what we have in common, like mental illness. I have heard it said that a person with a mental illness will have a profound effect on at least four people: a parent, another family member, a friend, wife or partner and a child.

Mathematically it is impossible for the rich to escape this devastation. At least 20 percent of the population suffers from mental illness.

When it comes to mental illness, the rich are the same as we are with one exception: They give their money — lots of it — to help



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Kicking Depression

others touched by mental illness. I know this because February in Palm Beach is high season for socialites.

Socialites at the top of society's food chain are not only opening their checkbooks but also lending their names to the cause — often because they have been touched by mental illness.

This week philanthropist Audrey Gruss will host a luncheon at Mar-a-Lago, the island's premier site for fund-raising. She is bringing in top doctors from Harvard, Yale, Johns Hopkins, Cornell and Columbia universities, and football legend Terry Bradshaw will share

tales of his battle with depression.

Gruss founded her own research charity — Hope for Depression — with her own money — \$25 million. She has no reservations speaking about her mentally ill mother.

"We're in the 21st century," Gruss said. "If revealing that my mother was emotionally ill ... and they pass judgment on me, I couldn't care less."

The following week Michelle and Howard Kessler will open their oceanfront mansion for their annual luncheon "No Family Goes Untouched" symposium to benefit mental health care and research at Massachusetts General Hospital and Harvard Medical School.

The next week, the National Alliance for Research in Schizophrenia and Depression comes to town for its annual mental health symposium — free to the public. In the evening NARSAD holds its swank annual gala at Mar-a-Lago.

Supporters like Mary and Mike Wallace (yes, THAT Mike Wallace, who also has struggled with his depression) and Sallie and Alex Van Rensselaer helped NARSAD raise \$1.3 million at last year's dinner dance.

I can't judge these people. They are just like me, touched by mental illness and wanting to help. For some it is making a "How-are-you-doing-today?" phone call. For others it is writing a check for \$1 million. We do what we can in our own ways. Who knows? That simple phone call could be priceless to the person on the other end.

Christine Stapleton's Kicking Depression column runs weekly in Sunday's Accent. To read previous columns, go to PalmBeachPost.com/depression. For help or information about mental health services in Palm Beach, Martin, St. Lucie, Okeechobee and Indian River counties, call 211. All calls are confidential.