

Psi Chi hosts “Coming Out Proud to Erase Stigma Toward Mental Illness”

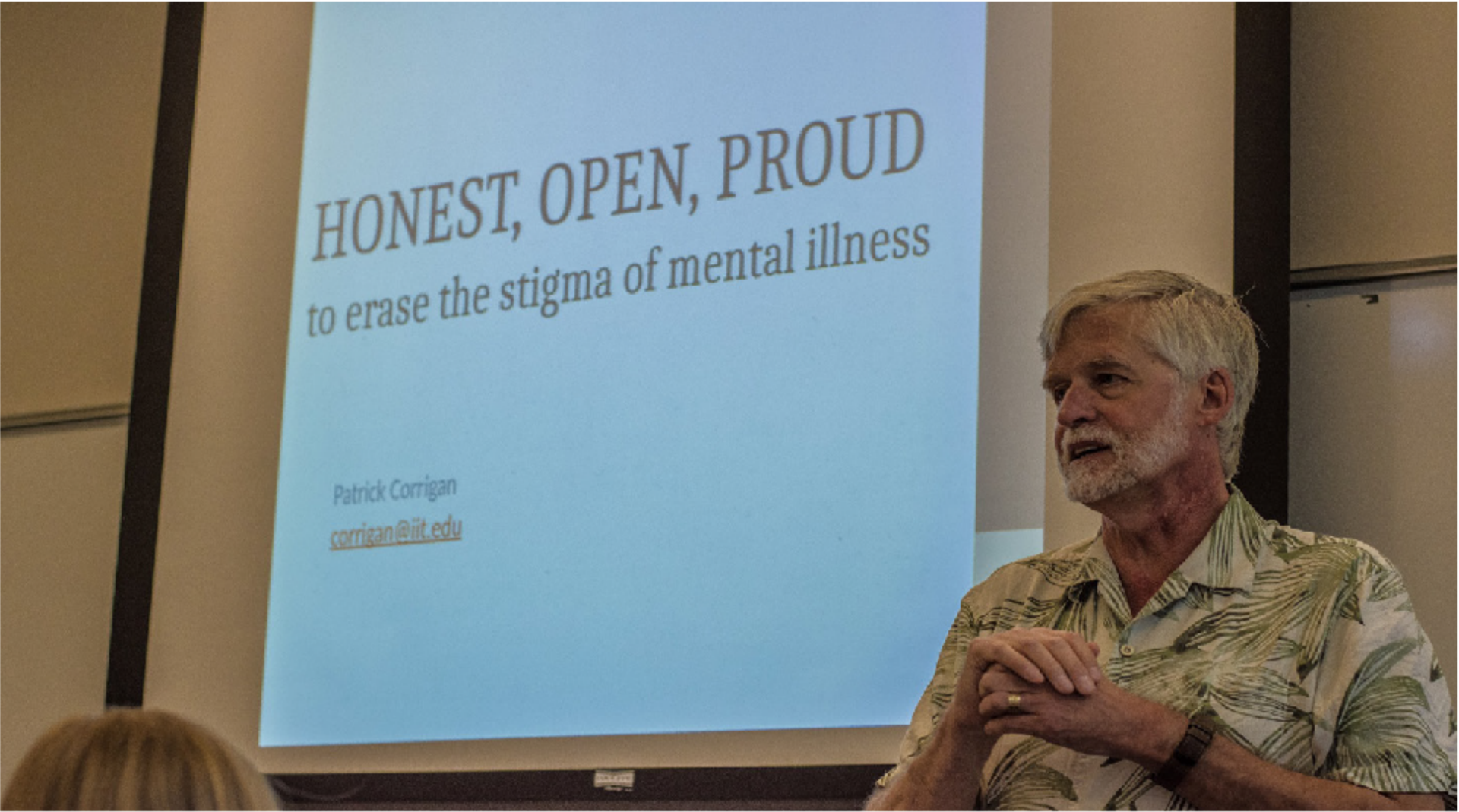
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Illinois Tech’s chapter of Psi Chi (the international psychology honor society) recently hosted “Coming Out Proud to Erase Stigma Toward Mental Illness,” an event on Monday, October 24 in which Dr. Patrick Corrigan, a professor of psychology at Illinois Tech, discussed how the stigma against mental illness-- both from the public and from the self-- can be addressed. During the event, Dr. Corrigan introduced a program he developed, called “Honest Open Proud” (HOP), as well as an adaptation created by undergraduate student Maya Al-Khouja, which aims to erase that stigma. Stigma is a huge problem of ignorance and misunderstanding, Dr. Corrigan discussed. For example, when Trenton Psychiatric Hospital caught fire in 2002, a New Jersey newspaper bore the headline “Roasted Nuts.” However, while it might seem reasonable to assume that general stigma has reduced in recent years, Dr.

Corrigan showed the audience a study that he had conducted, in which more people thought mentally ill people were dangerous in 2006 than in 1956: stigma has actually risen, , which many were baffled to hear. How, then, can stigma be addressed and reduced? One thing that helps, Dr. Corrigan explained, is encouraging mentally ill people who are comfortable doing so to come out to the public. Coming out is powerful: it sets an example for the general public that not everyone with a mental illness is “crazy.” Dr. Corrigan himself announced the audience that he was part of the mentally ill community. Additionally, Dr. Corrigan gave examples of celebrities that had come out as mentally ill-- both from his age, such as Rod Steiger, Patty Duke, and Mike Wallace, and celebrities from more recent years, such as Demi Lovato, Jim Carrey, and Leonardo DiCaprio. While hearing as many stories as possible increases one’s understanding of this particular group of people, Dr. Corrigan explained how a concept called the Thurgood Marshall effect inhibits

people’s understanding. Thurgood Marshall was the first African American supreme court justice, appointed by Lyndon B. Johnson in the 1960s. While this should have reduced the prejudice against African American people, many simply thought that Thurgood Marshall was an ‘exception,’ or that Thurgood Marshall was an outlier in the black community. This same concept can be applied when considering the stigma against mentally ill people. When the public hears of a celebrity coming out as mentally ill, some will simply think that the person is unlike other mentally ill people. Yes, that person is not crazy, some might say, but that’s because they’re so unlike other mentally ill people. Coming out is not for everyone, and Dr. Corrigan discussed the pros and cons of each decision. While coming out potentially allows that person to have a supportive community of family, friends, and other mentally ill people, sometimes a person’s family and friends may not react positively to this news. When a mentally ill person does not

choose to come out, they risk the people around them finding out because of an episode: they may lose the autonomy of coming out on their own terms. However, those who are out may constantly be answering questions about their condition or be faced with those who doubt their ability to complete tasks because they are mentally ill. Because of this, there is no ‘right’ option when considering when to come out or not: it is completely up to the individual and what they are comfortable with. Dr. Corrigan also discussed the important concept of pride: he explained how he thought that living and overcoming struggles related to his mental illness was more of an accomplishment than graduating from college would ever be. His mental illness was as much of a unique part of his identity as his Irish bloodline. Any questions about this program can be directed to corrigan@iit.edu.



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