

**Opening our eyes**  
***The tenacity of denial***  
**by Nan Dickie**

Many people who live with a mood disorder (clinical depression or bi-polar disorder) live in denial of their illness. The denial may be short-term, or, sadly, lifelong.

A person may outwardly deny their difficulty saying, “I’m perfectly fine. I just have the odd low day, like everyone else does.” Most often the denial is silent, held within. In fact, some people deny even to themselves any mental challenge. However, sometimes the truth seeps through the inner barricade and straight to their conscious mind. This can be terrifying as it breaks apart their core belief that, “I am mentally healthy.”

Then there are those who know in their hearts and minds, “I have a problem,” but will not utter that aloud. They think that their life will fall apart if they expose their hardship.

Even when a person tells a friend or family member about their challenge, they may get that supporter to swear they won’t tell a soul.

Why is denial so tenacious? Not just for those people who live with a mood disorder (as I do), but the rest of us in our society. Do you have a secret you haven’t told anyone? It may be because you’re afraid of facing up to something that is difficult to integrate into your life and what you, underneath it all, believe about yourself.

For a person with a mood disorder, or any other mental illness, the fear of exposure goes deeper. This person may think, “If I tell anyone about my mood swings, they (such as their family doctor) will make me take medication, or tell me I can’t work, or, at worst, commit me to the psych ward where they will give me shock therapy.”

I empathize with this thinking. It is extreme, but the feelings are real and the fear is overwhelming, even though the likelihood of that sequence of things happening is virtually nil.

One reason that any one of us chooses denial, however motivated, is that we fear that we will bring shame or embarrassment to ourselves and/or our families. Feelings of shame are most often a result of stigma, whether it comes from within (self-stigma) or from the outside (societal stigma).

No wonder we choose denial! What is our way out of it?

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The first essential step to become aware of and accept that we are inwardly denying something. The second step, should we choose to take it, is to ask questions: Does what I deny have some truth to it? Do I have (in the case of a mental issue) recurring episodes of depression? If so, am I ready to address it by seeking personal support or professional help?

Saying “Yes” to all of the above takes a great deal of courage. Now comes the third step: taking action, actively seeking a solution to your issue. This takes a further act of courage. Regardless of the nature of your denial, are you up to the challenge?

*[Nan Dickie is the facilitator of a peer-led depression support group in Salmon Arm. Meetings are held the first and third Mondays at Askews Uptown community room at noon. Everyone, including supporters, welcome. Info: [ndickie@telus.net](mailto:ndickie@telus.net); 250 832-3733.]*