

Opening our eyes
The Courage to Live With Mental Illness
by Nan Dickie

For more years than I care to admit, I was convinced that I was a weak person because I experience recurring episodes of depression. Out of this ill-informed self-perception emerged copious feelings of guilt and shame.

Today I know the truth. It takes a great deal of courage and inner strength to go through a lifetime of debilitating however-long episodes of clinical depression, bi-polar disorder, anxiety, PTSD, and any other mental illness.

There are many aspects to “going through” an episode, not to mention a lifetime of episodes.

First of all, for depression and bi-polar disorder, there is the gradual or abrupt, but certainly unmistakable, descent of mood, going from a mentally healthy (normal) state to the depths of depression. Even acknowledging the decline takes courage as one realizes that, one more, he is going to visit that black pit, the abyss, the place of utter aloneness and alienation. The fact that she has been through this countless times before doesn't lessen its impact on her current plunge.

When one experiences a mental illness episode, he or she must make adjustments in their daily living. Some people can't carry out work responsibilities when they are ill. Some are unable to face responsibilities at home. That is, one's outer life is as affected as one's inner life, and this is not easy to face.

Then there are the cruel symptoms that accompany the experience of depression: dread, fear, feelings of despair and despondency, a disintegration of self-confidence and esteem. How does one face these crippling realities without completely dissolving? She faces it with courage (coming from who-knows-where); with hope (knowing the episode will end—some time); with support hopefully (personal, medical); with steadfastness.

As one climbs out of the horrible trip to hell, he faces a world that has marched ahead without him. She has to face her friends and colleagues who may look at her askance. They have to put the strands of their “normal” lives together again—primary relationships, work commitments and other activities. So many re-adjustments, all when they have little energy with which to do this necessary reconstruction. This work requires determination, perseverance and endurance.

Most people with mental challenges choose to seek medical help, usually from a family doctor or at a walk in clinic, sometimes by going directly to the emergency department of a hospital. Some people go beyond this in seeking some sort of therapeutic help, through Interior Mental Health, a psychiatrist, or some other mental

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health provider (for instance, psychologist or social worker). To embark on therapy of this sort requires risk-taking and opening up: being honest about thoughts, feelings and behaviors; admitting to feelings of worthlessness and uselessness. He may have to make tough decisions about his work life. She may need to alter how she relates to her partner or children. These actions require courage and humility.

Finally, those of us with mental challenges live in a society that largely doesn't understand what living with mental illness is like.

But now you know! So, thank you for seeing us in a light of understanding and compassion; and accepting us as the brave souls we have to be.

[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; 250 832-3733.]