

Editor's note

This issue focuses on overcoming stigma, particularly of mental illness. The writer is Ruth Detweiler, a founder of No Longer Alone Ministries in Pennsylvania and currently Secretary of the ADNet Board. Links to Ruth's paper, "My Journey with Depression" and additional resources are found at <http://www.adnetonline.org/Resources/Online>.

My Journey with Depression

Many years ago I was asked to write an article on my experience with depression. I hesitatingly agreed to do so on the condition I wouldn't have to sign my name. So I was relieved to see it in print, "written by a woman who wishes to remain anonymous."

Twenty years later, something awakened within me as our minister's message on Luke 13 included persons with mental illness as likely being among those seeking Jesus' healing touch. I'm glad I can say my journey with depression over the years has moved from one of fear of being found out to where I can openly acknowledge the fact I have the diagnosis of clinical depression. I am not as worried what people might think or about the stigma of being labeled different, weak, not capable, not trying hard enough, even not having enough faith.

I now understand my depression is a mental illness, an illness of the brain, just as there is an illness of the heart, lung, muscles, etc. These brain diseases, such as manic depression (bipolar disorder), schizophrenia and clinical depression are caused by biological chemical imbalances. There are often genetic tendencies toward mental illness, as well.

Mental Illness and Community

Dr. John Toews in the book *No Longer Alone: Mental Health and the Church* (available from Herald Press or through ADNet), says: "We function in both the spiritual and mental realms. No person can be whole in isolation from others, for we were created for relationship. As community, we are called to represent the healing power of Christ."

The stigma often associated with mental illness tends to isolate persons from life in community, even the church. How can the community of faith respond to individuals and families dealing with mental illness and overcome this stigma?

1. Examine our attitudes. Unfortunately many persons with mental illness suffer disdain from society, and yes, from close friends and family members. Misconceptions and myths about mental illness persist and give rise to barriers and

marginalizing persons with mental illness. As a result, the power of stigma becomes all pervasive. We in the church need to examine our attitudes as well.

- 2. Practice acceptance.** I often suggest that we accept and welcome persons with mental illness in the very same way as persons suffering from a physical illness. And yet it can be difficult when greeting persons who feel ill at ease with themselves as well as with others. Some persons find it difficult to converse while others may talk non-stop or irrationally. Yet, recognizing the reasons for behaviors and practicing acceptance goes a long way.
- 3. Educate ourselves.** Stigma is a negative attitude that causes people to react to the idea of mental illness with fear and judgment. Basic to erasing this fear is to learn the facts! Take some time to educate yourself about mental illness, its causes, symptoms, and resulting behavior. Check with your public or church library for books or videos on mental illness. Contact us at ADNet for suggestions (1-877-214-9838) or visit our website at www.adnetonline.org.
- 4. Take action.** Sometimes folks feel paralyzed, not knowing what to do or how to relate to someone with a mental illness. I felt empowered when **I was asked** what I would find most helpful. I helped select persons to form a small circle of support around me and helped them understand when I wanted to talk over coffee and when I wanted a quiet walk or ride in the car. Of course, there are times when persons aren't able to identify and communicate what they want or would find helpful. It's usually safe to write a note or send a card. A short phone call to say "I'm thinking of you," or "I'm praying for you" is better than the pain of being ignored!

Resource Suggestions

A gift of hope: Standing with people who experience mental illness and their families is a free resource available from the ADNet Office.

Visit ADNet Online and especially this page, www.adnetonline.org/Resources, for more resources.

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