

My Journey with Depression **by Ruth Detweiler**

Twenty years ago I was asked to write an article on my experience with depression for the MCC Women's Concern's Newsletter. I hesitatingly agreed to do so, but with the understanding that I wouldn't have to sign my name to it. When it appeared, I was relieved to see in print, "written by a woman who wishes to remain anonymous."

Last Sunday our minister's message was based on Luke 13 where Jesus healed the bent over woman. Expanding on the image of others also seeking healing, she included persons with mental illness likely being among those seeking Jesus' healing touch. That openness to naming mental illness awakened some-thing within me.

I'm glad I can say my journey with depression over the years has taken a similar path....from one of fear of being found out who I really am and what people might think if they really knew.....the stigma of being labeled different, weak, not capable, not having enough faith.... if only I would try harder, pray more....on and on....to where I can openly acknowledge the fact that I have the diagnosis of clinical depression.

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 a manic depression (bipolar disorder), schizophrenia and clinical depression are caused by biological chemical imbalances. There are often genetic tendencies toward mental illness, as well.

My growing up years on a farm in Ohio in a typical Mennonite community included many good times. I did wish at least one of my five brothers was a sister and thought it was unfair I was the only one to help my mother with endless household chores. I can recall feelings of loneliness, unworthiness, insecurity and low self image. I remember wondering if people really and truly felt happiness and contentment. I struggled with God's call for obedience and tried to "follow all the rules". I was consumed with guilt when falling short, and fearful of God's judgment. I didn't experience God as a God of love nor understand the concept of God's generous grace.

I've described myself as one who sees "a glass half empty rather than half full", and I recognize my tendency toward depression over many years. My first experience of "sinking into the pit of depression" as an adult came at the age of 35. That was the first of several hospitalizations, including ECT treatments, psychotherapy, and trying many, many different medications before finding an effective one....which, I'm glad to say, continues to provide relief.

A poem written by Joyce Rupp in her book "May I Have This Dance?" (Ave Maria Press) is descriptive of my journey with depression.

DRY BONES

Here I am, one heap among many, just another stack of old, dry bones.
Some Mondays feel this way,...and Tuesdays, too, to say nothing of Wednesday,
Thursday, Friday.
Lost dreams, and forgotten pleasures.....Tiredness grounds me into a quiet stupor of
the spirit.
I yearn to be inspired, to be lifted up, set free, beyond the place of deadness.

The struggle goes on, however, and you and I, God, we exist together with seemingly little communion.

Yet, in the deepest part of me, I believe in you, perhaps more strongly than ever.

I'm learning you as a God of silence, of darkness, deep and strong.

And just when the old heap of bones seems most dry and deserted, a strong Breath of Life stirs among my dead.

Someone named God comes to my fragments and asks with a twinkling eye, "May I have this dance?"

The voice stretches into me, a stirring leaps in my head, lifting up the bones of death.

Then I offer my waiting self to the One who's never stopped believing in me, and the dance begins.

How can the community of faith respond to individuals and families dealing with mental illness? I suggest that we accept and welcome them 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 nonstop or irrationally.

Perhaps basic to accepting persons who are different, is examining 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 Stigma is a negative attitude that causes people to react to the idea of mental illness with fear & 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 Mennonite Mutual Aid's Mental Illness Consultant for excellent resources. If your community has a local chapter of the National Mental Health Association or National Alliance for the Mentally 111 (NAMI), a wealth of educational materials is available to you.

Changing attitudes and erasing barriers are big steps to acceptance and invitation! Don't we believe that we are all made in the image of God? As a community of faith we are a family of believers and the imitation of God. Imitating God not only occurs in attitudes but also in actions.

Dr. John Toews in *No Longer Alone* (Herald Press) 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." This community can create a safe place for pain to be shared...offering to be persons through whom the presence of God can be experienced....being God with skin on.

And now what are some practical ways this can be carried out?

For me, 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 name what I would like them to do?....telephone calls, sometimes just leaving a phone message if I

didn't feel like talking,... visits.... going out for a ride, coffee or lunch,....bring in meals,.... how often, etc. etc.

- What to share with the cong.?
- Ask them to pray for me when God seemed too distant. Reassurance that I am not alone!

A group of persons with mental illness was asked what they find helpful. Their responses Included the following:

Things I don't want:

- Don't tell me how I feel, or how I should feel
- Don't tell me what I should do, or not do

Things I do want:

- I want you to call and let me know I exist.
- Tell me you are there and that you care.
- Ask me how I feel and then let me tell you how I feel, in other words, **listen**, even if I'm full of anger or hurt.
- Let me feel your humanness and please be honest with me.
- Please leave the theological debates out....and no sermons.
- Be patient and understanding....have a knowledge of my illness.
- Remind me of my strengths, not my weaknesses.
- I need to trust you...care for me....but let God cure me.
- And please follow through for the long haul, and do come back to see me when I'm well.

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." How painful it is to be ignored!

The fact is we all need each other.....and while we all need healing, we are also called to be agents of healing. This recognition of our dual roles in healing and being healed is an aspect of mental health.

I like the concept Henri Nouwen introduces in his book, *The Wounded Healer*, where Christ offers himself as our Wounded Healer, and the challenge he leaves with us is to become wounded healers to each other. What a gift we can be to each other!

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Note: Ruth Detweiler is a founder of No Longer Alone Ministries in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. She currently serves as Secretary of the Board of Directors of ADNet.



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Anabaptist Disabilities Network

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