

The Power of *Stigma*

ON Mental Health Sunday (7 August 2006) at the Alice Springs Lutheran Church, Sharon Zweck shared part of her personal journey of overcoming some of the challenges of living with a mental illness. Here she reflects on part of her journey.

IT IS a sad fact that although much more is known about mental illness and mental health these days, society still retains much of the stigma towards those suffering - and their families - that was around decades ago. "Crazy" is a term that has often been misused to refer to people who experience a mental illness - but perhaps it is more 'crazy' that society shows such misunderstanding about those who experience an illness.

I felt a little nervous when I did a presentation to over 200 people at my church to tell them about my experiences with depression and anxiety. While I know many of them - and have done for over 15 years - I know for some of them it would have truly been a shock to hear I had experienced depression, and am on medication for it presently.

While I was standing there reading out my much-agonised-over notes, knowing full well that some of what I was saying would be helpful and maybe even enlightening to others, I just wasn't sure if people wouldn't think I was just a little bit 'crazy'.

I talked about what some of them may have been thinking about me and how they might possibly treat me in future... which I based on previous experience when I have told people about my illness. But I really can't feel annoyed at any of them because I have done the 'stigma' thing to others in the past - the treating people with suspicion, the watching to see if they do anything out of the ordinary, even the platitudes.

In fact, when I was depressed and seeking help, I found one of the hardest things to overcome was *my own attitude* to mental health, thinking that I could not possibly have something like 'that'.

The symptoms that I experienced - and this may be different for others - were the inexplicable and continual tiredness; the thinking that goes round and round and round your head about a particular thing preventing thinking about other important things (like where you are driving to); the incessant sighing; the 'foggy' feeling in my head and feeling of a little black cloud following me around; the tearyness when talking to others even when we weren't talking about things that were deeply concerning me at the time; not feeling at all hungry; worrying over simple daily tasks like what to wear; and a loss of confidence in myself in things I could usually do well.

... although much more is known about mental illness and mental health these days, society still retains much of the stigma towards those suffering - and their families - that was around decades ago.

One thing I really noticed was the lack of what I would call "joy" in my life. Even when things went right I reminded myself of bad things that had happened before or were waiting for me just a little ahead in the future.

Seeking help was one of the best things I had done for years. My doctor was a good listener and suggested I try a medication that is predominately a form of serotonin, a neurotransmitter that basically helps the brain deal with stress. Besides my symptoms being alleviated over the next few weeks and months of treatment, I found that many of what I thought were just character traits - like impatience and irritability - also improved. Another wonderful bonus was the decrease in migraine headaches.

In addition to the help I received from a trained professional, I also know how valuable my close friends were during this difficult time in my life. The ones who helped the most listened and listened well, and didn't give too much advice. They just showed me they cared by following up with me on a regular basis. Friends are the best, but to know they can help, you have to be brave enough to tell them first.

There is a lot we still don't know about mental illness - why it affects some and not others, and how it can strike at any age. As a community we still have a lot to learn, and learning to understand people who are different to us rather than labelling them is an important part of this.

I think it is part of my personality to be a little 'out there' - but I know I am not crazy. Ultimately, no one is, even though at times we might feel like it. Sometimes we might not know what's going on, or why we feel the way we feel, but I know people experiencing a mental illness show a lot of courage in getting through each day.

In some ways my illness has helped make me stronger. I'm not afraid of a challenge, and if my telling others helps just one other person to seek some help, or even talk to someone who cares about their low feelings, then it is all worth it. ✕

Sharon (Mum, wife, part-time teacher, part-time pastoral worker in my church, gardener and environmentalist)



Lifeline never sleeps
Any time, any day
call 13 11 14

for 24-hour 7 days a week
confidential telephone counselling