

Opening Our Eyes
Face-to-face: How we look, and why we hide
by Nan Dickie

Mental illnesses—especially mood disorders—are invisible illnesses. We (and I include myself as one who has lived with clinical depression since her teens) don't develop a rash, wear a cast, or sport a "DD" for "I have a depressive disorder" on our foreheads. When we are well, we look as healthy, happy and fit as you.

You have probably heard of Clara Hughes, the only Canadian Olympian to win multiple medals in the summer and winter Olympic Games; she is a true Canadian icon. In 2010, Clara publicly disclosed the fact that she struggled through two years of clinical depression after the 1996 Olympics. Since 2010, she has been a spokesperson for those who live with clinical depression and bi-polar disorder. She has worked with Bell's "Let's talk," a multi-year program designed to break the silence around mental illness and support mental health all across Canada.

Not long ago, Clara had a very candid and revealing TV interview with George Stroumboulopoulos in which she spoke very frankly about her years of depression.

"I was in inescapable despair; I felt helpless; I thought I was a complete and utter failure, and had to fix myself before I came back into the world." And, she added, "I thought it was all my fault. I thought I was never going to feel better; it was only going to get worse and worse and worse."

Although this was Clara's reality when she was ill, when you look at a photo of her, or hear her speak, would you guess that she has mental disorder, a mental illness? Not one bit. She looks perfectly healthy. And so it is with many of us with mood disorders when we are enjoying good mental health.

Often people with mood disorders are shocked by the onset of symptoms, which may appear literally overnight. That is the case with me. We may deny that symptoms are occurring because we want desperately for them not to. This denial may lead us to pretend that we are not on the downward slippery slope. Pretending to be well, the struggling person will do her utmost to appear well—to wear a "I'm fine" facade. She may reason, "If I pretend I am well, maybe I can will myself into being well." This is wishful thinking and, unfortunately, not achievable. He may rationalize, "If I pretend I'm fine, no one will see how weak I am, because depression is a weakness."

Depression is not a weakness. Clinical depression and bi-polar disorder are illnesses, and it takes a great deal of courage to live through multiple episodes of them. She may think,

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“If I pretend I’m well, no one will bug me with their ideas of what I should do to feel better.” Sadly, pretending is not helping her case.

Pretending is a form of hiding. It is not productive. However, it’s understandable why many depressed people choose this face.

What is our typical image of a person who is depressed? It may well be of a person looking drawn, eyes lowered, a blank expression at best, being by herself or uncomfortably with others. This is quite a different picture than when one is well.

Looking like how we feel when we’re depressed is the only thing many of us can do. We don’t have the energy to do otherwise. But, in being and looking as we are, we most often are hiding. We withdraw. We don’t let others “in.” We become mute.

Why is this so? We make self-judgments. He thinks, “I have to hide the fact I’m depressed because I shouldn’t be depressed. It’s all my fault.” Of course, we know now that it is not his fault; he has an illness. She decides, “I have to hide so that others don’t see how rotten and useless I am.” This is the disorder speaking. During an episode, she is still a worthwhile, valuable human being.

So, whatever face we wear when we’re ill, we are most likely hiding. How can we help depressed people realize they don’t need to pretend or withdraw? We can say to him, “I know how you’re feeling is terrible. But I want you to know that I really care for you as much as ever.” We can tell her, “You are very important to me, whether you believe it or not. I know that is difficult for you to believe now, but I’m telling you the truth.”

What will ultimately help people who hide (i.e., pretend or withdraw) is a big challenge for each, and all, of us. We need to reduce the stigma of mental illness. You can do that now by speaking compassionately with someone who is depressed.
