

Opening Our Eyes
Supporting your friend or loved one
by Nan Dickie

Those of us who live with mood disorders (clinical depression or bi-polar disorder) rely on the support and love of friends and family, especially when we are in the middle of an episode. In this article, I'm offering the perspective of a man who has supported a friend of mine, Claire (not from Salmon Arm), for fifteen years. After being together for ten years, they gave a presentation, "The Team Approach," to a gathering in Vancouver. The following is some of what Claire's supporter shared:

I need to say at the outset that I can only tell you what I have learned; you may have learned different things. There are big gaps in my knowledge even though we've been together fifteen years. My sample size is one - Claire.

Over the years, I have learned that I am only a supporter of Claire's, not a saviour. You can become overwhelmed by the illness and the demands of your loved one before you work out that you can't fix the problem. As a supporter, you are no good to anyone if you are swamped by the illness. You are far more valuable to both of you, and to your families, when you are healthy.

How can you do this? Keep a healthy, fresh perspective on the world and on life, and maintain a balance in your life. Foster your friendships. Learn about the illness your loved one has, so you aren't spooked by it. Learn about the symptoms of the illness and about the medications and treatments that are currently being offered.

You and the one you are supporting need to work well as a team if you are to be successful in making depressive episodes less severe than they are already. As my part of the team—the supporter part—I have responsibilities when Claire is ill. Among them are: to go with Claire to the doctor or other appointments as necessary; to be consistent in my behaviour and expectations; to be as even-tempered as possible; to be honest - for instance, I must say whether I think an episode is coming on; to reduce my expectations - I don't expect Claire to get and hold down a new job when she is ill. As well, I assume more of the household responsibilities at that time.

Claire, too, has responsibilities as a team member. She is responsible for taking her medication consistently, as prescribed. The medication is far from perfect, but it's better than nothing. Claire has to tell me if she needs me to do something. I can't always guess what an appropriate action may be. As a team player, Claire cannot do anything destructive or irresponsible behind my back. For instance, she must not make any serious financial commitment that involves us both without talking to me about it.

Opening Our Eyes
Supporting your friend or loved one
by Nan Dickie

Claire tries as much as possible to live a good life, even when she's ill. She exercises as much as possible, gets as much sleep as she needs, and gets lots of fresh air. I encourage her to continue with her hobbies and visit with her best friend. By doing these things, Claire optimizes her health, even though she feels horrible. Her efforts help us both cope.

Claire always takes an interest in my life, even when she's feeling terrible. I find it makes my support for her a lot easier if she cares about me and my little dramas and work-related woes. Her support of me means a lot when I know she is too unwell to take much of an interest in many things that must be a lot more important to her than my life.

The team approach is how we do our best to manage Claire's illness, and at the same time, keep up as normal a life as possible. Despite this approach, however, we don't have the illness in a nice, neat box where every episode is merely a smooth ritual.

There is a lot I find frustrating and annoying about Claire's illness. I am frustrated by the absence of an accurate diagnostic test and perfect medication for those with mood disorders. I am annoyed by the lack of appreciation on many people's parts about the seriousness of Claire's illness. I am disturbed by the shortage of mental health services for people like her.

This illness has robbed Claire (and the world) of her having a very fulfilling career and the good life that goes along with it, like expressing her creativity that is sadly dry when she is ill. The illness has no right to rob her of those things. At times, I want to stand up and shout, 'This isn't fair! What about our real, productive, fun lives? Why must they be put on hold at times because of Claire's illness?'

Claire, too, has responsibilities as a team member. She is responsible for taking her medication consistently, as prescribed. The medication is far from perfect, but it's better than nothing. Claire has to tell me if she needs me to do something. I can't always guess what an appropriate action may be. As a team player, Claire cannot do anything destructive or irresponsible behind my back. For instance, she must not make any serious financial commitment that involves us both without talking to me about it.
