

Opening our eyes
Here's a novel idea: Talk to me
by Nan Dickie

About eight years ago, I broke my wrist in a careless accident. I received a lot of sympathy and empathy from friends, acquaintances, and almost anyone who noticed I was wearing a cast. “Oh, how terrible!” “You poor thing.” “I can make you some meals.” “It must be awfully painful.”

Six years ago, I experienced a year-long episode of clinical depression. Although I was obviously in mental pain, had withdrawn from most of my regular activities, looked drawn, and most people in my world knew that I was unwell, those voices that had expressed concern about my wrist were mostly quiet. Some people chose to avoid me, others would talk to me “carefully,” making sure not to say anything personal. Others were obviously uncomfortable just saying hello.

I could count on the fingers of one hand the number of friends who had whatever it took to visit me in the mental health program at the Vernon Hospital.

During that long, dark year, my devastating symptoms—which were bad enough to warrant that hospitalization—weren’t any match for the emotional pain I experienced feeling abandoned by some people in my life. I honestly felt like an outcast, and I am not over-stating my case. I hasten to add that there were some people who were very much with me during that time, and to them I am extremely grateful.

Feeling abandoned is a very common experience for many people who live with mental illness. It’s not enough that we descend into a place of fearful darkness, lose our mental acuity, self-esteem and energy. Or that we may lose a job or partner (it happens). No. On top of all those indignities, we may be ignored or even rejected by some to whom we had thought we really mattered.

Why does this happen? I don’t think that people are intentionally mean-spirited or unkind. I think the backing off happens because most of us don’t know what to say to someone who is experiencing an episode of mental illness. “What if she breaks down if I say hello?” “I don’t want to make things worse by saying the wrong thing.”

Well, the solution is very simple. You could say, “I’m sorry you aren’t feeling well these days.” Or, “I want you to know I am thinking about you.” Or, “Is there anything I can do to help?” Or, “Please call me if you’d like. I’m here for you.”

You have no idea how huge it would be to hear comments such as these during that agonizing time. If there is a next time for me—and I hope there won’t be—please, please, talk to me.
