

Opening our eyes
What exactly do I live with? You may be surprised
by Nan Dickie

In many of the fifteen articles I've written in this series on mental illness, I have claimed that "I live with a mood disorder," or "...a mental illness," or "...clinical depression."

Those claims are true, but can be misleading. The words above are names (labels) for the life I experience. What I truly live with - and others who live with these disorders, for I am by no means unique - is a lifelong pattern of ease and dis-ease. What I personally live with, for a year or so every five or six years up to this point in my life, are symptoms. And that word, too, is a label.

At the most basic level during our episodes of depression, what we live with—that is, experience—is an ever-changing kaleidoscope of physical and/or mental fatigue, an inability to concentrate, feelings of inferiority, inadequacy and incompetency; piercing despair, despondency and dread. And more.

As if this isn't tough enough: the fact is that we live with an illness for which there is yet no cure. When I am not going into, being in the depths of, or recovering from, an episode, I am not "healthy" in the traditional sense of that word. No. I am "in remission." I am enjoying the absence of the symptoms of this disorder. This is a tough pill to swallow. Most of us want to believe, "It won't ever happen to me again. I'm over it." Who wouldn't want to believe this?

Living with a mental illness also means living with a great deal of loss. Loss of normal day-to-day living while in episodes; loss of self-esteem, self-worth and self-confidence during episodes. Some of us lose jobs (I did), partners and/or friends. Sometimes the losses feel inestimable and many are permanent..

What exactly do I live with, besides a mental illness, painful interruptions in my life, and loss?

I live with hope.

Hope is not wishful thinking; nor is it unrealistic expectation. Rather it is a desire for a certain thing to happen, accompanied by an expectation of, or a belief in, its fulfillment. My hope for me personally is that I do not have any further episodes of depression. This hope helps me focus on my goals, and live in the present. My hope for all of us who live with mood disorders, indeed all mental illnesses, is that treatment will continue to improve—medication for our faulty brains, robust modes of therapy for our minds, and increasingly effective self-help techniques. My hope for society is that we will each come to understand mental illness better, accept it as a reality, and thereby reduce the still much-too-prevalent stigma.

That is a whole lot of hope for all of us to live with.
