

Opening our eyes  
***The words we use do matter***  
by Nan Dickie

The words we use to describe mental illness and the experience of it reflect our attitudes to these challenges, and affect a person's ability to heal from episodes.

The mental illnesses I write about—clinical depression and bi-polar disorder—are called mood disorders. “Mood disorder” is a term that I like to use, as it doesn't illicit the negative reaction that the term “mental illness” at times still evokes.

Not long ago, depression was described as an enemy that must be defeated, a curse that one must flee from, a demon that must be annihilated with drugs or other “weapons.” Sadly, language such as this is not constructive, nor does it reflect a compassionate attitude or healthy approach to these mental disorders. In fact, this confrontative stance can fuel the fire of depression or mania. A person in this “battle” can end up feeling like a failure—a loser in an impossible fight.

Rather, we need to use words that accurately describe the intensity of the mental experience, admitting to its awful reality, without giving it the power of an enemy. It is quite accurate for one who has a mood disorder to describe it as “cancer of the mind,” as this term does reflect the pain, fear and immense challenges associated with the cruel illness of cancer. I often hear depressed people talk about “the dark pit,” or “the black hole.” With an expression like the Black Pit, a person may have some success in wrapping depression into a shape whose dimensions are not infinite. In calling an episode “an ominous presence,” one acknowledges its ever-present darkness, without bestowing it with hate or making it an enemy.

Those of us who live with mood disorders are not “mentally ill.” We live with episodes of mental illness. We are not our illness—it does not define us. We live with a disorder. Can you see it that way too?

Let us all be on the same side—the side of knowing that mental illness is an illness and not a weakness; the side that supports and brings hope to every one who has a mood disorder or any other mental illness; the side that is willing to learn new ways of thinking and talking about these difficult disorders. Let us make it so there is no “other” side.

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