

Opening our eyes
We all have a need to belong
by Nan Dickie

Our need to belong is a basic human need, exceeded only by our need for food and shelter. I used to scoff at this notion—not about food or shelter, but about belonging. I didn't think it was very important.

When I was in my twenties, my third basic need was to be an independent, self-assured and confident individual. To belong to anything, I thought, required me to relinquish my uniqueness. I wanted no part of that. So, I marched on confidently with my independent, individualistic acquaintances. I could hardly call them friends, as we were each competitive, motivated primarily by self-interest.

Time passed, and I experienced a few year-long episodes of clinical depression. Those terrible interruptions in my life brought me down off my pedestal. Gradually, I realized that my disdain for groups was no longer because I wanted to be that independent self-assured individual. Rather, my aversion was now based on fear. I was afraid that if I allowed myself to try to join any group, the people in it would see what a rotten person I was, and my massive feelings of shame would shine through. I couldn't allow myself that humiliation. In recognizing these deep fears, I also realized I was extremely lonely.

This is a very common experience, and way of thinking, for many people who live with a mental illness. Many of us get stuck in that place of loneliness, longing for some sense of belonging: belonging to one other person, to our families, to a collection of like-minded and like-hearted people.

How can one get unstuck? It takes a lot of courage to change, here specifically to let go of the assumption of being unworthy, to step into the unknown, to risk rejection. There is no guarantee that we will be embraced by those we wish to truly connect with. But the alternative is continued isolation and loneliness. This is often enough to pry some folks from their stuckness. But not everyone.

But the responsibility for including any specific person, especially one who is different, in a group does not reside only with the person who wants to belong. It is the responsibility of each member of a group, be it a family, social organization, volunteer team, etc., to assess whether they have a stigma related to that different person, whether she has a mental illness, he is indigenous, or she is a woman of colour. Then each member harbouring that stigma must address that attitude and change it if they care at all for the happiness and well being of that person.

Are we prepared to make this change so that more “different” people can feel they belong in our families, our groups, our communities?
