

Words matter

BY JULIE RICHTER, MD, CGP

Both depression and anxiety are often seen as emotional weakness. The depressed are "too sensitive," the anxious have "irrational" fears. "You're overreacting!" "Don't be so silly." "Just get over it!" Humiliation naturally worsens both depression and anxiety and promotes stigma. Words can have an enormous effect on how we feel and react.

Time and energy are precious resources, we must use them wisely. Stress is a huge drain, reducing it is very worthwhile. Stress consists of two parts, stressful events, and how we relate to them. Realistically, stressful events will keep happening. They often evoke anger, sometimes fear, sadness, disappointment, grief, guilt, and embarrassment. There are no "negative" emotions, even these unpleasant ones are normal and adaptive. But these feelings are certainly unpleasant to experience. When they seem like too much to bear, some people opt (unconsciously) for pushing them down (i.e. depression) or losing themselves in a state of generalized overwhelm (i.e. anxiety). Other ways to escape are numbing (substance abuse) and distraction (compulsive gambling).

The good news: if we are suffering in one of these ways, we are not alone. The bad news: despite the fact that such problems are very common, stigma is a huge barrier to getting help. No one wants to think of themselves as mentally ill. Even without "medicalizing," there is stigma.

People returning to work after a sick leave of more than a week or two naturally experience considerable anxiety. If the leave was for depression or anxiety, one is likely to keep this secret, which only adds to rumours of one's 'mental problems.' Such problems are expected to recur, so there is

often pressure from above and/or coworkers to quit. Isolated from the work group and scapegoated—more stigma. A relapse is often triggered, leading to poor performance or more time off, and a vicious cycle is established.

Seldom mentioned, chronic physical illness has become one of the most common stressful events people must contend with. At least 50 per cent of adults suffer from one, and seven per cent over 45 from two or more, life impacting chronic health problems such as heart disease, arthritis, diabetes, high blood pressure, physical disabilities, and a long list of others. Improvements in medical treatment not only prolong life, they have turned people who would have been sidelined in the past into functioning members of mainstream society. They ride the TTC on scooters, they attend concerts in wheelchairs, Oscar Pistorius races on prosthetic legs. A transplant liberates many from the haemodialysis machine. Laws requiring accommodation in the workplace enable people in wheelchairs to work alongside the able-bodied.

Stigma results from the natural human tendency to avoid or label people who appear different or vulnerable, and it realistically may never disappear. People with visible signs of illness usually have to deal with discrimination, hostility, fear, disgust, condescension and simple curiosity, all adding stress to situations that are already very stressful.

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