

Ask Dr. K®: Writings For Your Mental Health

THE STIGMA OF EMOTIONAL PROBLEMS

Dear Dr. K,

I've been depressed for several weeks. The symptoms are just like they talk about in the TV commercials- I have a lousy mood. I'm not happy. I have no energy and just don't care. I'm just not me. I told my family that I want to get some help but their attitude is "pull yourself together and snap out of it." I've tried to do that but nothing works. There are several people in my family who have been depressed for a long time. They're miserable to be with. I don't want to end up like them. If I see a psychiatrist, I know there will be trouble. What do I do?

Carol H., Sarasota

Dear Carol,

Despite improving attitudes about getting psychiatric help, your problem, unfortunately, is still a common one. I continue to be amazed at how someone will tell you about his stay in intensive care or his hip replacement or her latest visit to the doctor and what he said. In fact, sometimes it's hard to stop a person from showing you the scar from the last operation. Yet, not too many will tell you about the appointment with the psychiatrist or, horrors, being in a psychiatric hospital. People still don't want to show you those scars.

Although there certainly is a changing attitude towards getting treatment for emotional problems, there is still a stigma for having such a difficulty to begin with. Fifty years ago, for example, if you were depressed (or anxious or phobic or obsessive), you were weak. If you did not overcome the depression by your own 'will power', it was your fault. So, according to this nonsensical way of thinking, you felt horrible and, on top of that, you felt more wretched because you were causing it. You were more confused because you thought you did not want to be this way, but, because YOU were causing it, you must certainly "want" to be depressed. So, you also felt bad about feeling bad and not functioning. Pile the guilt on.

This attitude is absurd because it is like telling a diabetic that if he does not control his sugar by will power, it is his fault. Or it is yelling at someone with anemia or thyroid problems to will themselves to bring the blood count up or make the thyroid normal.

Dr. K is Stan Kapuchinski, M.D., a board-certified psychiatrist still practicing in Punta Gorda, FL. For an appointment or if you have questions, please email him at DrK@StopYourMisery.com. Dr. K.'s book, *Say Goodbye To Your PDI (Personality Disordered Individual), Recognize People Who Make You Miserable and Eliminate Them From Your Life for Good!* is available at Amazon.com, Barnes & Noble Booksellers, and HCI Books. Visit his website: www.StopYourMisery.com

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As it becomes clearer and clearer that many psychiatric problems are based in your genes and a chemical imbalance, society is slowly becoming more accepting of these types of problems. It is becoming quite obvious that people do not “want” to be depressed or anxious or miserable. These problems are not fun and NOT a choice, just like heart problems, asthma, headaches, low iron. Sure, you can do things to keep healthy, both physically and mentally. The way you chose to cope with the problems in your life can certainly help or aggravate the way you feel. However, what you can do is only so much when you are dealing with heredity or your body’s chemistry.

You may be surprised to know that insurance companies and even Medicare single out psychiatric problems as ‘different’. They offer different coverage (usually lower) for these problems. There are movements working right now to bring about what is called “parity” for health insurance. This means that your coverage for emotional problems is equal to that of any other medical problem. Even here, the stigma continues.

What to do? Educate those around you with this “dark ages” attitude about what you are going through and what can be done. Explain to them that your depression is not a choice for you. Tell them that if you could undo it, you certainly would. They might listen that it is necessary to see a professional (as with any other medical problem) when symptoms do not go away with time and effort. Maybe they will hear you, maybe not. But, please pursue some form of treatment and not continue to be miserable. This is the point where, if you do not get some help, you can only blame yourself. If you had a growth on your skin that was getting bigger, you would not ignore it because your family was afraid of what it might be. That would be very foolish! Good luck.

Dr. K.