

# The Telegram (St. John's)

Insight, Wednesday, May 3, 2006, p. A11

Slice of life

## **Reflections on mental health**

Acceptance of illness doesn't come easily

Geoff Chaulk

In August of last year, I had the difficult experience of taking sick leave from my job due to what became my worst bout of depression.

I'm the executive director of the Canadian Mental Health Association in the province. I was originally treated for depression in my early 20s. I am now 47 and have been treated several times since. I should note that, as a teenager, I made an attempt at suicide - an attempt significant enough to greatly upset my family and be referred to a psychiatrist at the Janeway hospital.

For most people who live with mental illness, onset generally takes place in late adolescence or early adulthood. As an adult, treatment for me has involved a combination of medication, psychotherapy and self-help.

## **Acceptance**

Over the years, I have become more accepting of my illness, but this acceptance has not come easily and, in some respects, it is still not complete. Also, I am someone who has spent his professional life, some 25 years, working in the area of mental health. I wanted to write about my recent experience as part of my own process of acceptance and to share with others a message that is hopeful.

For me, when dealing with episodes of depression, the signs of onset are not always clear. However, the one sign I am unable to deny is sleep disturbance.

When my sleep is disturbed for a period of time, and not just a night or two, I grow concerned that I may be becoming

depressed. Sleep disturbance struck again last spring.

This, in itself, was unusual for me as I find summer a time when generally I don't worry about becoming depressed. With the passing of days and weeks, I realized that my concentration was poor (I read a lot and found that I could not follow a plot line), my appetite dropped off as did some weight and, of course, my mood was depressed.

I also had rather catastrophic emotional reactions (in my head and not shared with anyone) to relatively minor issues - work related and otherwise. Anxiety plagued me and would erupt for no apparent reason.

It is in my current healthy state of mind that I can look back on those months and see more clearly what I was like. You will notice that some of the symptoms that I experience are physical in nature. This is not unusual for many people who live with depression.

Also, and I'm a bit embarrassed to admit this, but as the signs and symptoms started to set in, I abruptly stopped my anti-depressant medication. I think I was frustrated and angry that even with medication (albeit a fairly mild one), I was getting ill again. If you are reading this and taking anti-depressant medication, I strongly suggest you not do what I did unless you have discussed it with your physician. There is evidence that people should be tapered off antidepressant medication so as to avoid withdrawal-like symptoms.

Having suffered through a couple of summer months being fairly sleep deprived and feeling worse over time, and a discussion with a colleague, I finally made an appointment with my family doctor. He is a great guy who seemed to know rather quickly that I was depressed.

He was prescribing the anti-depressant medication I had been taking. He was kind and generous with his time - that morning in August - and he gently told me I would need to stay off work. He also wanted me referred to a psychiatrist for an opinion on medication change and psychotherapy support. I'm fortunate to have a family doctor, and a good one at that. For most Canadians, it is a family doctor they reach out to when experiencing the signs and symptoms of

depression.

I was eventually referred to a fine psychiatrist who took the most detailed history on my mental health and mental illness that I have experienced in more than 20 years of periodic treatment.

As a result of this assessment, my medication was changed with good results, my mood went back to normal, my appetite returned and eventually my sleep pattern became healthy again.

Medication is an important part of my recovery, but it is not the only part. I have great support from my family and close friends. Even neighbours in the apartment building where I live reached out to me. I continued with self-help and I am in the process of restoring my spiritual life.

Good mental health should never be taken for granted. Twenty per cent of Canadians will experience a mental illness in his or her lifetime and eight per cent will experience depression. In a recent study, 20 per cent of women surveyed in the workplace showed signs and symptoms of depression. More than 50 per cent of Canadians identify work as the most significant source of stress in their lives. Stress that is not addressed can lead to physical and mental health problems.

During Mental Health Week (May 1-7), the Canadian Mental Health Association will launch a mental health meter at [cmha.ca](http://cmha.ca) to help you determine your current mental health. I encourage you to try this exercise. Trust me, losing your mental health is a very painful experience. Recovery is possible and many of us have recovered, continue to recover and are moving forward with our lives.

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**Illustration(s):**

**Category:** Society and Trends

**Uniform subject(s):** Psychology and human behavior  
**Length:** Medium, 683 words

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