



mindset

BY KAREN STEWART, MA

fear of being crazy

Receiving a diagnosis of any kind is always upsetting to some degree. If the condition is minor and temporary, the degree of concern is minor and temporary. An ingrown toenail is painful and the treatment is no fun, but it is not life threatening and the duration of the pain is relatively short. At the other extreme, a diagnosis of cancer or a progressively debilitating or terminal illness brings with it a radical shift in one's identity, quality of life, and expectations for the future. Diagnoses of very serious or life threatening conditions can bring on anxiety and depression as we attempt to cope.

However, even in the most serious physical conditions there is rarely a component of shame or incompetence. We recognize that while lifestyle factors may contribute to our conditions (smoking, unsafe sex, etc), there is rarely a sense of personal failure. Unfortunately for many people that is not true when the condition affects our mental health. While attitudes have radically shifted from the times when we thought mental illness was caused by possession by demons for many there is still a stigma attached to seeking help for emotional issues.

WHO WE ARE?

Most people who come into treatment and especially those who need medication feel badly for needing to ask for help. The nature of mental health issues is fairly unique—no one feels like a personal failure for needing help with a broken arm, pneumonia, or other physical condition, but the feeling is common with psychiatric illness, most especially for men. Most people are also afraid of making themselves vulnerable. Sharing our most private thoughts and actions can be quite anxiety provoking. Most of us are deeply afraid of being judged and found wanting. We talk about “having” a physical problem (diabetes, flu, cancer), but emotional problems seem like *who we are*. Anxiety and depression make us feel vulnerable in a different and far deeper way

I once worked with a woman who had experienced panic attacks for more than 20 years and had never told a soul. Panic attacks are extremely distressing. A person can feel like they are literally going to die or go crazy. People often wind up in the emergency room because the symptoms can be quite similar to a heart attack. To have endured that kind of experience alone for 20 years is at once

very courageous and tragic. She endured this pain because she was terrified of being labeled as crazy.

I have worked with people who have been extraordinarily dedicated and competent at their chosen work but who have worked so hard for so long at the expense of their own health that they have burned out. They suffer from anxiety and depression and become unable to work for a period of time. They experience extreme shame for having to ask for help, for letting people down, and often feel like failures.

Perhaps most tragic are the people who experience difficulties having a stable sense of who they are, dealing with anxiety and depression as the result of trauma. Traumatic events—physical/emotional/sexual abuse or ongoing long-term neglect and lack of adequate support—can have deep and lasting effects. Unfortunately the victims of trauma often carry great *unwarranted* shame that makes it very difficult to ask for help.

Awareness of mental health issues is growing. Television ads for medications for anxiety, depression and a host of other issues have raised the general knowledge of symptoms. Unfortunately, the solution is often presented as a pill that can be prescribed by our family physician. Medications can be extremely helpful in some cases and somewhat helpful in others, but without talking to find out what is causing the emotional pain it is a bit like taking a pain killer for a broken arm. The pain may be masked but unless the underlying problem is resolved it will still be there.

Talking about problems helps. It is like shining a light into a dark place. The place is not as frightening as before. Having another person accompany you into that dark place is comforting. Having another perspective on what is going on can be enlightening. Having suggestions for how to shift thinking, bear difficult emotions, face difficult memories or events can be life changing. The reality is that feeling truly known and clearly seen allows for deep healing. It is like washing out a wound, painful but absolutely necessary for healing.

The first step is of course to face the fear of asking for help. Sometimes talking to a friend, a pastor or a family physician is enough. But if that is not enough calling a psychologist, social worker or counselor is the next step. Finding the name of someone to call from a trusted friend or physician is always a good idea. There is no shame in experiencing emotional difficulties. It is the nature of being human. 🌱

Karen Stewart, MA, and David Stewart, PhD, are psychologists who work with individuals, couples, groups, and organizations in their Durham practice at Suite 220 at 811 Ninth Street in Durham. Reach them at (919) 286-5051. www.stewartpsychologists.com