

Running a support group: SADAG

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As I write this article I recall one of my patients very aptly describing her experience of suffering with depression as similar to having a broken rib. From the outside one looks fine, but every time you breathe in or out, the pain and suffering is excruciating. For those never having experienced this, it is very difficult to fully comprehend and to empathize.

This article is written for anyone suffering with a mood and anxiety disorder that has taken the courage to better their situation and ultimately improve the quality of their life. Whilst depression and anxiety can feel utterly disabling and soul destroying, there are many stories of hope and courage and the treatment for these disorders has come a long way in recent years.

The reason I chose to facilitate a depression and anxiety support group was as a result of witnessing the overwhelming sense of loneliness and isolation that many of my patients experience. I wanted to bring people together to create a sense of unity and

PATIENTS AS PARTNERS

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compassion where they could share their stories of courage, perseverance, heartache and resilience in a safe and non-judgmental environment. This was four years ago, and I'd like to share some of the benefits and remarkable stories I have witnessed on my journey with this particular support group.

As anyone who has ever suffered with a mood or anxiety disorder would know, the stigma attached to any mental illness can lead to victimization and it is not uncommon for patients to feel ostracized within their communities. At times, this may be due to their 'perception' of events as hypersensitivity is a known symptom of mood and anxiety disorders. A common reaction is to withdraw and isolate oneself from social events and friends. But more often than not, there is a very real sense of feeling misunderstood, especially as symptoms can manifest very differently in each person.

In the absence of any overt or 'concrete' symptoms, mood and anxiety disorders often go undiagnosed for many years. Patients describe feeling as if they're going 'crazy' or believe somehow that this is their own doing and they should be able to 'snap' out of it. Somehow it seems that part of our socialization in the western world is to be 'strong', meaning any display of emotional vulnerability is seen as a sign of weakness. Ironically, it appears that being tough and in control, at times to the point of being aggressive, is equated with power and success.

Many a high profile businessman has told of having to 'grin and bear it', 'get on with it' so to speak, while inwardly his world is falling apart as he suffers with acute stress and anxiety. One only has to look at the increasing suicide statistics to fully comprehend the tragic consequences of this way of thinking.

Audrey*, a young member of the group, shared her experience of suffering with panic disorder. During her grade twelve year, Audrey presented with up to ten panic attacks a day. She was misdiagnosed with frontal lobe epilepsy, and she was prescribed the incorrect medication. Her symptoms persisted despite a plethora of treatments, neurological tests and various specialist assessments. This continued for a period of two years, when finally the correct diagnosis of panic disorder was made. It was only at this point that Audrey finally understood the nature of her disorder and after receiving both individual and family psychotherapy she learned to manage her symptoms effectively.

Ironically one of Audrey's symptoms was losing the power of speech when experiencing a panic attack and this was the underlying core of the panic disorder, her inability to talk about her difficult experiences and assert herself within a dysfunctional family. Audrey's road to recovery has included many hours of journaling her thoughts and feelings, and reaching out to others in their time of need. As a young adolescent, Audrey suffered ridicule and rejection from friends and peers. Her family were reluctant to engage in family therapy and seemed more comfortable with the diagnosis of frontal lobe epilepsy.

Today, Audrey is a motivational speaker and psycho-education is first and foremost on her agenda. The one thing that Audrey is most grateful for is the ability to face life's challenges and deal with daily struggles panic-free. This highlights the very real need for support of sufferers of mood and panic disorders, as often their nearest and dearest are ill-equipped to provide the necessary strength and comfort for the healing process.

The benefits of the support group are best summed up in the words of the group members themselves:

"A place I can go where I am not judged and it feels like a family to me"

"I realize I'm not alone and I can speak openly without having to be embarrassed or ashamed"

"Witnessing that there is hope and experiencing first hand the benefits of medication, psychotherapy and good management of the disorder"

"Learning from others and sharing my own management of the disorder gives me a sense of purpose"

"My lifeline"

"I can bring my family and friends so they too can learn to understand my disorder a little better"

There are support groups run throughout South Africa addressing a range of psychological disorders. The topics presented vary and each group will have a different approach. For the majority of support groups run by The South African and Anxiety Depression Group (SADAG), psycho-education is a key aspect. Useful information and resources are provided to assist in the understanding and management of both mood and anxiety disorders. Guest speakers are often invited to give talks in their areas of expertise.

Most groups are informal and open sharing is encouraged, although this is purely optional and many members prefer to listen to others sharing. If there is anyone reading this article that feels they too can benefit from joining a depression or anxiety support group, please contact the head office of The South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG) at 011 262 6396.

* Name changed to maintain confidentiality.