Disclosing My Diagnosis

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Having schizophrenia means living under cover because it's not considered socially acceptable. Every single day I am out in public there are people using stigmatic words like psycho, schizo, crazy, psychotic, schizophrenic, and a slew of others. Some of them bother me and others I just laugh about but regardless of what I think these labels change people's perception of me. Fortunately, I am someone who is healthy enough where it is not visible in my actions or speech that I have had any sort of mental illness for some time. However, this causes many people to relate to me about other people in stigmatic terms without them realizing they're talking about me. I usually have to play along and ensure I create a reaction that makes them think I am just like them; looking at these other supposedly "crazy" people from the perspective of the herd. I usually don't say much during these encounters but I'll try to agree and act like I'm on board with what they're saying. Sometimes I'll make a small comment like, "Maybe that person's had a difficult life" but it's generally a subject I tend to avoid because I can't afford for people I work with and interact with daily to know I have schizoaffective disorder. I'm concerned they would disparage me, be afraid of me, and or treat me differently, or completely avoid me. Hearing people criticizing and putting down people with mental illness every single day has made it difficult for me to disclose my diagnosis to even my closest friends, and it's something I haven't been open about to the majority of people in my life. It sometimes creates a fear that everyone surrounding you isn't very accepting of an unshakeable trait of yours. Constantly hearing people disparage this particular trait has made me more guarded about it because it has lead me to sometimes think I will lose friends or I will be seen as the guy with schizoaffective disorder instead of simply being seen for who I am. From age 19 to 25 I was in almost complete isolation from schizoaffective disorder because I was unable to function well enough to interact with people and have friends. Isolation and loneliness were one of the most difficult and painful parts of dealing with schizoaffective and having the knowledge that disclosing my diagnosis may recreate these things has had the ability to create a great deal of fear. In my mind

I know what it is and it doesn't bother me whatsoever. I know that I'm a good person and I've never been violent or harmed anyone but others don't realize this. They've been misinformed.

Disclosing my illness has been a tricky business and it has sometimes worked and other times lost me groups of friends. At age 26 I was just out of my episodes and I was far more symptomatic than in later years and I was having trouble socializing. I had a group of work friends I regularly hung out with but I was socially awkward sometimes and said some strange things. Although I was awkward we had been hanging out for about a year and a half together and I finally decided to disclose my illness. After doing so the phone calls stopped coming in, they weren't picking up the phone, and I had lost this group of friends entirely. It was difficult to deal with and I sometimes wondered if I would ever be able to disclose my diagnosis. Memories of loneliness and isolation from episodes returned because once again I was on my own. At this point I was still functional enough to socialize with others so I wasn't completely isolated but I was still alone and it was painful to think I couldn't disclose a characteristic of myself that I may have for the rest of my life. However, I picked myself up, moved on, and I made new friends. I later had another friend who I was also somewhat socially awkward with and this same occurrence happened. Finally, after I had improved my functionality enough and I had ironed out a good amount of my social ineptitudes I made another new group of friends. During my interactions with this group I was different but still healthy, happy, and very supportive of the people I hung out with. While disclosing my illness to this group and every subsequent group of people thereafter they stuck with me, and many times we became closer.

For these new groups of friends I had created a positive frame of reference for schizophrenia which helped pacify any worries they may or may not have had. Before disclosing my illness to these newer groups I made certain they had shaped a perception of me for who I am. I hung out with them for many months without informing them of my diagnosis. After I felt we were close friends I disclosed

the diagnosis and most of them didn't care at all. Our experiences together had shaped their perceptions of me instead of listening to popular culture and stigmatic socialization with others. Most of them couldn't believe I even had a diagnosis and they are all still my friends to this day. In prior years when I was socially awkward and disclosed the diagnosis they already had a negative perception of me and associated this with the illness. Afterwards, I believe their prior stigmatic perceptions of schizoaffective disorder came into play in their minds and these influenced them to stop hanging out with me. It's important to note these people had been hanging out with me when I was socially awkward before I had disclosed my illness but immediately stopped afterwards. This concludes for me that the frame of reference I have created for people to view me through has influenced the way they perceive me after I disclose my diagnosis. I know my family will always be with me but this has also informed me that I will have friends who will also be by my side. My friends and I are now close enough where

I believe they aren't going to leave me regardless of how good or bad my health becomes.

When I've been able to disclose my diagnosis to people it has also made socializing with them far easier because there are no longer subjects I need to avoid. Understanding they are completely at ease with every facet of who I am has put me at ease and has many times made it easier to disclose my truest thoughts. I am no longer forced to avoid certain subjects or answer questions with responses that don't create more questions about issues regarding mental illness. I can also disclose as much information on anything we are talking about because I don't have to worry about anyone asking why I know so much about psychology, schizophrenia, bipolar, or anything having to do with mental health. With certain people I can now talk about anything that interests me without worrying it's going to lead to an unwanted disclosure of my diagnosis thus alienating and isolating me. To read Steve's Memoir and more of his work please visit SteveColori.com.