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The Weekly DRILLING REPORT

Breaking the silence

How do we deal with mental illness once it is recognized?

CRYSTAL RHYNO
Herald-Tribune staff
Thursday May 08, 2008

When Dana Stringam repeated his wedding vows to his fiancé, Autumn, 17 years ago, there was no way of knowing within a year he would be heavily tested on those promises. But tested he was, and suddenly his once blissful and joyful relationship turned into one of bewilderment and embarrassment.

His young bride began acting strangely and Stringam was at a loss for words.

"I knew there was something weird going on but, to be quite honest, I grew up in a family where mental illness was not an issue," the former Grande Prairie resident explained.

"She started to have these weird behaviours. She would wake up at 2 o'clock in the morning and clean the whole house and she would get mad at me because I wasn't helping. I just thought, 'why are you being so weird?'"

Obsessive cleaning and other peculiarities began to slowly emerge. It was after the birth of their son, James when Autumn's mental illness became all too clear.

"It's one of those things, once you're diagnosed you understand what the symptoms are and you look back and recognize the behaviour," he said. "She had been sick since her teen years. But it really didn't explode until after the birth of our son."

Doctors diagnosed Autumn, 20 at the time, with bipolar disorder, a condition characterized with alternating periods of mania and depression.

"It was almost a bit of a relief for her to be diagnosed because there was a name for this disorder and she thought she could get treated and get better," the dutiful husband said.

"But for me, it was a bit more scary. I just didn't understand what that meant. I thought I didn't want to be married to somebody who is mentally ill. It was terrible. Now how do I tell my family? What do I do? It's not the same as being diagnosed with diabetes, to me anyway, I guess that's where the whole stigma comes in early on it really affected me."

When she was first diagnosed, Stringam said, he tried to keep a lid on her condition and make it appear that everything was normal.

"That was extremely difficult but I felt like I had to play that game. Maybe everybody would feel that same way if (he or she) were in that position because it was so ugly. The truth is ugly," he said.

"Definitely one of the biggest problems was trying to hold it all together and keeping silence."

Mental illness was something that ran in her family as both Autumn's mother and grandfather suffered from the disorder and both family members committed suicide due to the disorder.



Dana Stringam is full of joy now but laughter wasn't always easy to come by in his household. Stringam is the dutiful husband of Autumn, who he stood by when she was diagnosed with bipolar disorder. She has now become symptom-free.

Photo: Crystal Rhyno

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Autumn took various drug cocktails and treatments until one day she began taking a nutritional supplement developed by her father. Autumn's symptoms disappeared and she has been symptom-free for 11 years.

Autumn and Dana Stringam were the keynote speakers in events around town this week, sharing their story as a part of Mental Health Week. Autumn published a book, A Promise of Hope, last year, detailing her early childhood, her disease and the treatment that saved her life.

Delvin Napen, executive director of the Grande Prairie branch of the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA), said the Stringams were a good example to help share this week's theme "mental wellness is everyone's business."

"The reality of Autumn and her recovery is well documented in her book and the reality of the family history. It is very hard to deny results. We're enthused from an organizational perspective with the fact that someone has experienced recovery."

He added, this week is to recognize, "the more knowledgeable we are (about mental illness), the less likely we are to see (mental illness) as something we shouldn't talk about and the more likely we can all be support to someone who is struggling."

Stringam is modest about his fortitude in standing by his wife.

"This was just one of those things that was a challenge and you have to deal with it. You just take it head-on and try to overcome ... We are all given these challenges in life and it's what we do with them that make a difference."

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