



The Forgotten Ones

by Marilyn Avient

If you can afford to have a family and a home... a job... a car... kids in extra-curricular activities... no one cares if you have trouble getting out of bed in the morning. So what if you are so sad and anxious that you seriously believe that dying would be easier? But you do get up. You do drive in rush-hour traffic. You do go through the day with a smile on your face doing everything your boss expects you to do. So what if you hide in a washroom stall and cry into your sleeve to muffle your tears of panic... emerging in a few moments looking like nothing is wrong? The thought of answering that incessantly ringing telephone is enough to cause a panic attack because you know that someone will be expecting something of you. Only you know that you have very little left to give. You wonder if the day will ever end... and then you know you have to go home and appear to be... fine. Your weariness at the never ending cycle of your life is enough to break you down but you can't let it... you just can't. What would your colleagues think? What if you were passed over for that raise? What if your spouse was to find out how desperate you feel?

What if you are a homemaker and once the children have left for school, you sit down at the table with a cup of coffee staring out the window wondering why today can't be your last? The dishes need to be done, but you haven't got the energy to even walk over to the sink. Supper needs to be planned so that things will look normal when "they" come home. That package of hamburger on the counter becomes the focus of your day because somehow you have to remember how to make it into something edible. That task feels impossible. Getting up from the table becomes a painful "maybe" because you used up all your energy pretending to be okay for the morning rush. You know you have to go grocery shopping but when you get to the car, you panic and rush back into the house. After the third attempt to get out the door, you give up and pray that tomorrow will be better. Oh, if only they knew that you would rather die than have to live one more day like this. BUT they don't know so you just have to keep putting one foot in front of the other... somehow.

Those lives may belong to you, a family member, a work-mate, a friend, a neighbour, the man at the dry cleaner. It could describe the secret life of someone, anyone or even everyone you know. It is the middle-class best kept secret... depression. ➤

It's 2010. We hold amazing technology in our hands. We view distant galaxies in breathtaking detail. Yet we still find it hard to really talk about depression or mental illness. The stigma is still too great, and the doubting of that is just plain naivety. How do I know that? Because I was one of those people. Is there hope? Yes, because I am no longer one of them. Is there any way that I can help others to get to where I am? Yes, by sharing the story of my illness and how it affected me and my family. I encourage others to do the same.

There are many programs intended to help people who are down and out and suffering from all manner of mental illness, and I applaud them because they are so very needed. Years ago many of those people would not have been homeless because they were situated in government institutions. But then it was decided it would be a way of saving public money so they closed those facilities and literally sent the patients out into society with no safety net. How they expected them to cope is still a mystery to me. Some of those places should have closed earlier for sanitary reasons but new and improved ones should have taken their place. I don't care how much money it saved the government then because now it has gone full-circle. The government is being plagued with requests for financial help. I have the greatest sympathy for these afflicted persons but they have a number of advocates fighting for them. As for people like me... perhaps people like you... we have none.

I used to like to sit in restaurants and do acts of kindness by paying the bill for one or two of the patrons. I would sit and watch and then choose who would be my "prey." At first I started paying for the lunch of the person who looked the most impoverished, but then I had a revelation. I started looking at the other customers - the "working stiff". I remember one fellow who was reading a newspaper as he ate. He looked tired. He had on a suit that hadn't seen a drycleaner in quite a while; his tie was sloppily undone in the way a man does when he has come to the end of a hard day. This man was just there... he had a job but there was no sense of happiness

about him at all. His was the lunch I paid for that day. Why? Because he was one of the forgotten ones.

Even if he was depressed and/or suffering from some other mental condition such as bipolar disorder, no agency would be reaching out to help him. He is that "middle child" of society; again, one of the forgotten ones. He would have to go to his doctor who would most likely prescribe him some pills; if he was really in dire straits he might be referred to a psychiatrist for the purpose of getting his medications worked out. His family physician may also suggest that he go to see a psychologist for some counseling. However, psychologists are not cheap and what if he just earns enough money to make ends meet? If the person is lucky he will have a health plan through work which will pay for a couple of sessions but if not, he's on his own and that's usually when he decides he can't afford to get help. The pills will help him physically, no doubt, but what about the mental and emotional side of his illness? Those are often the overlooked elements in the hell that the forgotten ones are living through every day. Those who are exhausted - who can't tolerate the smothering, painful, black sadness any longer, take their own lives. Just like that. First they are forgotten by society; then they are something their families are ashamed to talk about. Sad. Sad. Sad.

While I am trying to be an advocate for all those middle class people who feel like they are all alone in their individual versions of hell, I need your help. I was one of the forgotten ones and you are the people I am reaching out to. It is my story but I will bet that, in some way, it's also yours. It's my voice, but I am speaking for you (for them)... until you all feel visible enough and safe enough to speak for yourselves. Then, together, we can be there for each other and all of the other forgotten ones.

Marilyn Avient is the author of "Free At Last – My Journey Into, Through, and Out of Depression" as well as the playwright and performer of "Dirty Laundry", a one-woman two-act theatrical production based upon her true story.

Depression in Canadians

- In any given year, about 7% - between 13 million and 14 million people - will experience a depressive disorder.
- Of those who develop depression/anxiety, only about 20% will receive adequate treatment.
- About 16% of adults will experience depression/anxiety at some point in their life.
- About 97% of those reporting depression/anxiety also reported that their work, home life and relationships suffered as a result.
- According to Health Canada and Statistics Canada, approximately 8% of adult Canadians will experience a major depression/anxiety at some point in their lives.
- Depression/anxiety continues to be Canada's fastest-rising diagnosis. From 1994 to 2004, visits for depression/anxiety made to office-based doctors almost doubled. In 2003, that meant 11.6 million visits to doctors across Canada about depression/anxiety.
- Twice as many women as men are diagnosed with depression/anxiety. However, this may simply indicate that men are less comfortable seeking help or do not get an accurate diagnosis since depression/anxiety in men often manifests itself as a substance use problem.
- Bipolar disorder is a less common form of depression/anxiety that affects about around 1 to 2% of Canada's population.
- 54% of people believe depression is a personal weakness.

(Bayridge Family Center, Ontario)