

From darkness to light: Couple to hold seminar on depression

TOM COLLINS
KOURIER-STANDARD

Dead.
That's where 43-year-old Sharon Lowell says she would be without her husband, Steve.

"That breaks my heart to say it," she said. "You reach a point where you believe the best gift you could give them is not to be here."

Sharon suffers from severe depression, anxiety, sleep disorder and obsessive compulsive disorder.

The Lowells lost their home, life savings, investments and ended up more than \$150,000 in debt.

Now, they're hoping to help others. That's why the Kanata Lakes couple is holding a seminar about depression at the Minto Suites Hotel on Oct. 15. The seminar will focus on helping those who live with people who have depression and anxiety.

"For some people, it might never occur to them to seek out help," said Sharon. "They might be too proud.

It's a monster that drains everything."

As Steve can attest, living with someone who suffers from this illness can have a big impact on the former's health. That's why the seminar will focus on the silent victim, and what they can do to help.

"We've learned so much," said the 45-year-old mother. "We have a lot of information to share. It's all based on trial and error. We'll walk through the lessons we've learned. I didn't realize I didn't have to be a victim. I want to turn my greatest agony into my greatest triumph."

THE BEGINNING

Steve and Sharon met when they became neighbours in Bridlewood. Steve had just split from his first wife. On his first Father's Day alone, Sharon knocked on his door, thinking he could use some company. That's when their romance first blossomed.

A couple of years later, in 1998, they married in

Chatham, Ont. Sharon's demeanour changed overnight.

"The day after marriage, she was a different person," said Steve. "Her entire being was different. I'm driving home thinking 'Who on earth is this?'"

The next five years of their lives were difficult. Sharon would become moody and obsessive compulsive. If Sharon wiped the coffee table and still saw dust, she would vomit, and end up dusting the table 30 times.

She would change plans, and cancel meetings with friends. She would spend days in bed at a time. She had a fear of meeting other people, and would watch her children play soccer games from the car because she couldn't go near the other parents in the stands.

She had flashbacks of bad memories, and one time the ambulance was called when she went into convulsions at a movie theatre.

Steve ended up with ulcers and chest pains.

"I didn't fully become conscious I was ill until after I was married," said Sharon.

She first experienced the bouts with depression and anxiety when she was a teenager. Although she went through more traumatic times as an adult, such as immediately after her first marriage, she felt she had to put on a mask of being "normal" when she was dating Steve.

She thinks she subconsciously thought she had a protector that couldn't leave her now that they were married, so that's why she stopped pretending to be "normal."

The two boys from Sharon's previous marriage live with the couple. They would sometimes be the



TOM COLLINS/KKS

Steve and Sharon Lowell went into debt, lost their house and nearly got divorced because of her battle with depression.

brunt of the anger Sharon could unleash due to the depression.

"I tried to shelter the boys," said Steve. "They did see a lot of things. I tried to stand in the way as much as I could. I tried to make life perfect at the house."

Steve knows now that was

the wrong approach. There has to be a line drawn, marking what someone with depression can get away with.

"When are you making the illness worse by accommodating it, and when are you making the illness better by confronting it?" he

asked.

It got to the point that Steve started meeting with his lawyer, and actually signed the papers to get a divorce. His lawyer wouldn't file them until he got the final OK from Steve.

Steve's lawyer told him it's better to get a divorce before the five-year mark, because that's when the spouse becomes a dependent by law.

Steve called the lawyer, but to tell him to destroy the papers.

"I didn't want to divorce her," he said. "I married her because I loved her."

Still, the fight got more difficult before it got better. There were nights where Sharon wanted to kill herself, and Steve stayed up with her all night to ensure it didn't happen.

Looking back now, Steve knows he went through five stages:

DEPRESSION
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News & Community

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— Denial: People think they couldn't be married to someone with these types of problems, he said.

— Secrecy: He didn't want to talk about it, and didn't want anyone to know about Sharon's problem.

— Anger and resentment: "Our life was starting to fall apart," he said. "This is where families fall apart, because this is where I almost walked out."

— Understanding: Steve started going to the psychiatrist with Sharon, and made a commitment that failure wasn't an option.

— Forgiveness: "Now I understand it was an illness," he said.

"The faster people can get from the denial stage to forgiveness, the better a chance for a family to stay together," said Steve.

When dealing with children, it is important families are blunt.

"Education is everything," said Steve. "Even at a young age, they know the difference between real mom and sick mom. I let them know it was OK to ask questions."

According to the Public Health Agency of Canada, "depression and manic



TOM COLLINS/KKS

The Lowells hope their seminar can help other couples who are going through a battle with depression.

depression are among the most common illnesses, affecting more than 10 out of every 100 people."

As well, a 2003 Statistics Canada report states "as many Canadians suffer from major depression as from other leading chronic conditions, including heart disease, diabetes or a thyroid condition."

"According to the World Health Organization, five of the 10 leading causes of disability are related to mental disorders. It predicts that in less than 20 years depression will be the second-leading cause of disability in the world. Health Canada

estimates that in 1998, mental disorders were the third highest source of direct health care costs at \$4.7 billion."

In fighting the illness, Steve and Sharon went into debt. They tried all types of cures, but nothing seemed to work. It was a combination of treatments that has helped her deal with the disease.

"Her illness cost us everything," said Steve. "It doesn't have to cost families. There are things they can do to take control of their lives."

There is no cure for depression. Sharon still has

to manage it every day of her life. But now she and Steve can see when she is slipping back into depression.

"We're controlling it, it's not controlling us," said Steve.

The Lowells point out that what works for one person may not work for another. It may also be a combination of a few different things. That's why they're offering so much information at their session.

"It's all bits and pieces we picked up along the way," said Steve.

If you sign up for the seminar before Aug. 30, the charge is \$50 per person or \$80 for a couple. After Aug. 30, the charge is \$75 per person and \$100 per couple.

In January, the Lowells are hoping to hold a two-day seminar that will be more interactive. They're also planning to speak at other cities across Canada.

"This is an epidemic problem," said Sharon. "There's no need for stereotyping. It's an illness just as much as cancer or diabetes. There's nothing to hide or be ashamed of."

For more information, visit their websites at www.silentvictimseminar.com, or www.apathothealing.com.



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