

Accepting Differences

Newcomers and visitors may ask, Can a DRA program help me even with the type of symptoms that I have? Such feelings are not uncommon. We need to help newcomers recognize that a variety of symptoms are possible with a dual illness. There is no single type of dual disorder.

Our chemical problems also vary. For example:

- One man used alcohol, while another used many different drugs.
- One woman got high daily, while another got high only once a month.
- Some of us have been in treatment programs several times for our chemical dependency, while others have received outpatient care while living at home.
- Some of us have been clean and sober for a long time, while others have yet to become abstinent.

We have found that this is also true when we consider the symptoms of our specific psychiatric illness and worry that they will set us apart from others. For example:

- Some of us use prescription medications to control our symptoms, while others have symptoms that need no medication.
- Some of us have struggled for many years with our psychiatric illness, while others have just begun to experience the onset of symptoms.
- Some of us have experienced changes in our ability to perceive reality clearly and have experienced hallucinations, whether they come in the form of hearing voices or seeing visions.
- Some of us have felt increased energy or have experienced changes in our ability to think and make judgments. We may have also found that our thoughts sometimes race and seem to go out of control.
- Some of us have felt a loss of energy, a loss of enjoyment of life, and have perceived life from a negative perspective. Perhaps our sleeping patterns and appetite have changed as well. We may have become suicidal. We may find that we have difficulties with our thoughts and concentration.

These lists are far from complete, but they point to a common bond; both men and women are affected by different types of no-fault illnesses whose symptoms can disrupt the ability to function and relate to others effectively.

Some of us feared that we were becoming hopelessly impaired. We came to believe that we would never be "normal" again. Many of us have experienced great shame and guilt. We believed that our emotional or psychiatric illness and chemical dependency were our fault. Some of us have become secretive. We tried to keep our drinking and drug use a secret, and later some of us felt a need to keep our recovery and Steps a secret. We also felt our psychiatric illness must be kept secret, especially if our recovery program included prescription medication.

We seemed to run out of ways to protect our feelings and self-esteem, and to protect ourselves from the attitudes of those around us. Many of us gradually went into a closet of denial. If there are any among us who have felt as though they were living in that closet, we welcome you. We want you to know that the fear, isolation, and secrecy no longer need be a part of your life.