

I *THINK* I'm OK

by Clay Williams

I have to admit that this article took me a long time to write. I put a lot of thought into it and I've chosen the language very carefully, because I think the things I'm writing about can be very subjective and I want to try to be as clear as I can be that I am speaking only from my own experience, my own knowledge. Please forgive my rambling.

When I was growing up, the medical community used to recommend that we get regular checkups, with the intervals being different for different conditions or aspects of our health, even if there are no symptoms or problems that we're aware of. If we're told to have a physical check-up, it makes sense to have a mental health checkup as well, right? OK, so here goes.

For most of my adult life I've thought to myself that I'm kind of "normal" and "healthy" and average, and that there are tons of people just like me. And why wouldn't I? Most of the things around me supported that view. I grew up in a little northern Manitoba town, where it was normal to have a Mom and a Dad, it was normal to be punished when you did something wrong, it was normal to have some little thing that made you at least a little different from everybody else. And everyone I knew grew up in that same little town. Through my teenage years, we moved to bigger and bigger towns and I met people who had grown up in small towns and in similar circumstances. There were lots of people around me who appeared to be in a similar situation that I was in, so I guess when it's related to a person's life or lifestyle, my original definition of normal would be something like: "conforming to the things I saw as a kid, and the ways that people reacted to those things."

My physical health has been generally good, with a few injuries here and there, and a few "complaints" as I get older. The physical health of others is something we can often see, and something that people are usually willing to talk about, there's not often an associated stigma. Over the past ten years, I have volunteered at aid stations during ultramarathon races. I especially enjoy being at an aid station through the night for 100 mile races, and helping the runners after they have been on their feet for 16, 18, 20 hours. The part I enjoy most is hearing people's stories. These athletes who are confident enough to be at the starting line of a 100 mile footrace often have a story about recovering from or overcoming some devastating illness or injury or trauma. If you were to meet any of them on the street, you would never know of the struggles and darkness that they have endured. Even our physical injuries are not always clearly visible or evident, so we can never assume that our emotional injuries or illnesses are visible either.

My mental health has been average, I guess. Normal. That means "healthy," right? As I was growing up, people didn't talk much about the things that make them anxious or about any emotional state other than anger or happiness, so I assumed most people were like me, and because of that similarity I think I'm healthy. But I've been thinking more during the past couple of years about that definition. When it's related to mental health, what is "healthy"? For a long time my engineering mind wanted to know if there was a threshold, a certain level of thinking or

feeling that clearly defined healthy and unhealthy. But like many things in life, as I learned more about mental health, I began to discover how little I knew, and how complex the question of mental health was.

For the first twenty years of our marriage, my wife's normal condition included strong peaks and valleys of emotion, and we thought that frequent crying and loud angry arguments were normal parts of life. After admitting that wasn't healthy, she was ready and willing to seek and receive help. The point here is that we simply didn't know what "healthy" and "unhealthy" meant. I found a very helpful definition in a brochure from the Mood Disorders Society of Canada. It's pretty normal to feel stress, anxiety, fear, sadness, or anger as part of our response to situations. It may be a disorder when symptoms are persistent over time, and interfere with a person's ability to study, socialize and manage daily tasks. This simple definition has been really helpful in understanding and "defining" how I feel.

So that's a really long way of saying that I've done my own checkup, and I think I'm ok. Even with that, I have to say that I always keep something in mind: "When you're in a dark place, talk to someone you trust." We don't always need to see a doctor when we're hurt, but getting some help from someone we trust, someone who we know has our best interests at heart and would not intentionally hurt us, can do a lot of good, even with the things that we think or only small.