

Living with Schizophrenia

By Jacquese Armstrong

It's actually schizo-affective disorder, but who's counting the symptoms?

I've spent more than half my life trying to get my symptoms under control through medication. I have always said that if "I got to this or that place, my life could start," but each time my efforts have been thwarted by this illness. My back is to the wall now.

I don't have any more career ideas to try, having embarked on three full-fledged careers – complete with training – only to be shot down by schizophrenia. I'm on disability and I can't see my way out yet. In my 31 years of dealing with this illness, I have had seven relatively symptom-free years thanks to a drug that came out on the market several years ago, and I've lived independently for eight consecutive years. In addition, I did work full-time for nine years. And of course, I've worked part-time at just about every minimum wage job you can imagine.

A recent realization has come over me. Life isn't going to start at my 'right' place. It has been going on all along. Not the life I wanted to know at all, but then who wants to know this? I have been and am living with schizophrenia.

And sure, I've written a couple of articles and given a few speeches and workshops, as this is what I want to do – even if I never earn from it. To me, helping other people to cope is a logical way to reduce my own pain. I have also come up with wonderful theories and observations about life with a mental illness. And I was proud of myself.

But a short time ago, on the seventh day of a job I hoped would relieve me from the social security rolls for good, I had a psychotic break... again. I had a meltdown at work for everyone to witness. Although I was

working as a peer, and by definition people knew about my illness, it was still devastating. This was my worst fear come true...a meltdown in public.

This changed the ballgame dramatically for me.

All of my illusions are mirrored glass fallen to the floor. I am living with schizophrenia.

Don't get me wrong. This doesn't change my motivational drive - or hope and faith status. It just tempers the thinking a little. It plays with the positive attitude at times.

I'm sure most would agree; it is a bear to live with this illness. Severe paranoia, psychotic and sometimes suicidal thoughts, severe depression, mania, and anxiety are constantly trying to transform my world. So, I am forever adjusting, adjusting, adjusting. This is my life with schizophrenia.

Thankfully, I come from a highly spiritual and intellectual family, so I (long ago) developed a strategy to deal with these changes. It is a way to deal with the constant disappointment over dreams lost. I call it the '4R's.'

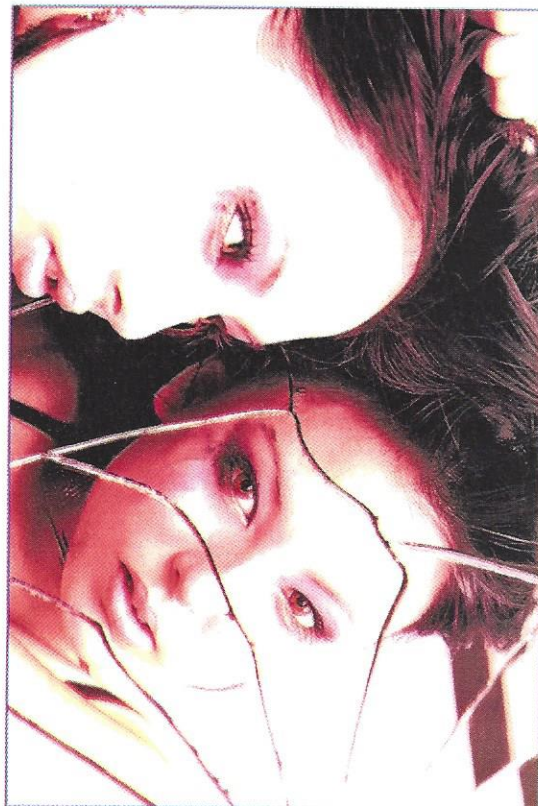
The naming of this sequence actually developed out of a poem I wrote about how promise is stolen by the 'thief' of mental illness. But, you can regain the goods by using this strategy. You can refocus, reevaluate, redefine, and redirect.

This is how it goes:

Refocus on a positive aspect of your calamity; believe it or not, there is always something positive to find in any calamity.

Reevaluate. See if you might be able to figure out another route or another goal and bring more possibilities to your mind. This will make you feel more empowered.

Redefine. These steps enable



you to redefine your goals, yourself, or your purpose. This is what many of us in the Christian Faith call "let go and let God," because you have to truly commit to this redefinition of letting the old one go.

Redirect towards your new goal/purpose/self. Drop the old labels from the dreams lost and invest in your future.

So, though I don't want to be, I am at this junction again; trying to focus on something positive from this (in case you don't know I am taking a long pause now). This new development gives me time to pursue my more 'elusive' dreams while I work at yet another minimum wage part-time job.

This is living with my brand of schizophrenia. **A**