

## The D-word

by Veronica Morris, PhD

My name is Veronica and I'm 26 years old. My service dog is named Sabrina. I live with bipolar and panic disorders. Sabrina is trained to alert to significant bipolar mood shifts and the onset of debilitating panic attacks. She has been instrumental in helping me get through doctoral-level training in the biological sciences.

Coming to terms with and accepting the disability label was not easy for me. I resisted it fiercely and without realizing it, I held a distorted view of what being disabled means. Over time and through my own research, I learned two important lessons. First, people with disabilities aren't so different from people without disabilities. Second, labels are only as scary as the fear that we choose to ascribe to them. Words alone are neutral.

In the course of my journey, I made friends among the disabled through participation in online forums. I got to know people with obvious physical disabilities as well as those with invisible disabilities. Previously, I assumed that if someone had an invisible disability, it must be so severe that the individual would be required to live in a hospital or nursing home. Now, I appreciate that this isn't the case. It took meeting people with invisible disabilities for me to understand that they're not much different from people without disabilities. They just need a little bit of extra support.

Mental illness can be an invisible disability that carries a lot of social stigma. Many people are afraid of mentally ill persons, because their only (perceived) contact with them is through newspaper headlines or television news reports that sensationalize crimes of passion or bizarre behaviors. If more people were open about mental illness, then the naïve would see that mentally ill people are, in fact, everywhere in society. We are not chainsaw-wielding killers on the verge of a rampage. We are living, breathing, thinking, feeling individuals. We are parents. We are family members. We attend church. We vote. We are everywhere, and we've learned to hide our pain in order to blend in with everyone else. I believe that people with mental health disabilities should stand tall and be visible. "Mental illness" and "disability" are simply words that describe aspects of one's experience in the world. Being referred to as "disabled" is not as scary or terminal as I once thought it was.

It took a long time for my parents to accept that I had a mental illness and even more time for them to appreciate how profoundly disabling it is for me at times. When my treatment team recommended that I partner with a psychiatric service dog, my parents were very unhappy. They did not want to have a disabled daughter. I don't think it really hit home to them that I was legitimately disabled and required Sabrina's assistance until a recent family vacation we took together. My parents and I went to Louisiana to visit some family members this past Christmas. My parents were accustomed to dealing with my unpredictable mood swings and severe anxiety whenever I was out of my "safe zone"—that is, home. I had been unstable for years and they didn't consider me disabled, just very high-maintenance and "difficult". However, the first trip that we took with Sabrina quickly changed their minds.

At first, they were upset that I insisted on bringing my "pet" on the family vacation, but as the days went by, my

parents began commenting on how much happier I seemed and how much more relaxed I was compared to previous family vacations. By the end of the trip, they were slightly more accepting of the idea that their daughter has a disability and requires use of a service dog.

A few months later, my mom flew across the country to visit me, and that's when she really saw a difference. On this visit, she did not see a daughter who was unable to utilize public transportation by herself or go to a new place alone. She did not have to endure the extensive contingency planning on account of severe anxiety, or the unpredictable mood swings and terrorizing panic attacks. In fact, she was amazed that I took public transportation by myself to a strange hotel in the middle of the city in order to meet her. She was delighted that I was able to function like a "normal" member of society. Indeed she was thrilled that she didn't need to worry and watch out for me all the time, as she was used to doing.

For my parents, it required the experience of seeing me fully functional for the first time in order to appreciate that without Sabrina, my disability really gets the better of me. Once my functioning was restored, they realized just how badly off I had been for much of my life. As a result, my parents have come to love Sabrina, because they see the miracles she is facilitating in my life. Sabrina gives me life—a life that I would have otherwise missed out on. My parents are finally getting to know their 'real' daughter for the first time.