MENTAL ILLNESS: The Gift of Kind Words

This is the time of year some people spend a large amount of money and time on finding just the perfect Christmas gift. However, a well placed compliment, a genuine “I love you,” a thank you for being you can be invaluable.

When someone you care about has a brain disorder, their capacities for communication are often drastically altered. People with brain disorders experience a high degree of perceptual overload. In depressive episodes, individuals are hypersensitive to the slightest degree of noise and confusion; episodes of mania bring a rush of fragmented thoughts; in panic disorder and OCD people are distracted by a flood of internal fears which make it impossible to focus on anything else. Nowhere is this problem more apparent than in brain disorders that include episodes of psychosis.

Having schizophrenia means the person is overwhelmed with information; by thoughts and feelings from within, and by a bombardment of sounds from outside. People with this disorder appear to have a faulty “shut-off” mechanism and are unable to filter out noise. They also have difficulties with “short term” memory. There is an inability to concentrate and an inability to track complex communications.

So what is the lesson here? KEEP IT SIMPLE! Think about the old saying, “Good things come in small packages.” Say what you mean in one short well-placed sentence followed by a BIG PERIOD.

Use praise to encourage any progress, no matter how small. Praise can be attention, physical affection, expression of interest, and commendation. Notice any improvement or effort and ignore flaws. Be specific about what you like. Try this format: “I feel \_\_\_\_\_\_\_ when you \_\_\_\_\_\_.”

“I am so happy to see you exercising.”  
“You look so nice with your hair that way. I feel good when I see you taking care of yourself.”

“I feel excited that you are going to the Circle Up support group.”

“I appreciate that you washed the dishes while I was at work.”

“I enjoy being with you.”

“I love you.”

NOTE: There is so much more that we teach in the NAMI class on communication skills. Some of it is not easy. Giving positive feedback is the easiest, but often the most neglected one. Try it. It gives a warm glow. It builds self-esteem. It gives HOPE.