

# Spouse providing care in need of support

*By Dana Lewis, MSW*

Nearly one quarter of the Canadians providing care to someone with a psychiatric condition is his or her spouse.<sup>1</sup> According to studies, approximately 20 to 30% of people with schizophrenia live in a stable partnership.<sup>2</sup> Marriage rates for people with bipolar disorder and depression are closer to that of the general population. Although difficulties are not inevitable, higher rates of relationship problems and divorce have been reported for people with severe psychiatric disorders.<sup>3</sup> Just like there are no “typical parents” of people with a psychiatric condition, there are no “typical partners” or illness-specific relationship patterns.<sup>4</sup> There are, however, common experiences as couples grapple with the multiple challenges of living with a psychiatric condition.

The burdens experienced by spouses are different from those experienced by parents in significant ways. Onset or relapse of a psychiatric condition can alter the way a couple cares for children, divides household tasks and experiences emotional and sexual intimacy. While the relationship between parents and children is usually seen as an unbreakable lifelong bond, marriage or partnership is perceived as a relationship based on certain conditions and expectations that can, under some circumstances be ended.<sup>5</sup>

When partners seek help, it can be difficult to find. In my work as a family counsellor I have met with partners together and individually when one or both are experiencing a psychiatric condition. Couples have often reported dissatisfaction with generic couples counseling because their difficulties may relate more to the illness than to relationship skills. Likewise, family support groups tend to address the needs of parent care-givers and provide limited opportunities to discuss parenting, developmental risks for children, sexuality, separation and divorce.<sup>6</sup> According to the ex-wife of a man with schizophrenia, “I am convinced that if someone had helped me understand my husband’s illness without my having to go through the long, painful process of learning step by step...much pain could have been avoided”.<sup>7</sup>

If you are interested in being part of a support circle for spouses of people with a psychiatric condition, BCSS would welcome your call or e-mail. Appointments for brief, solution-focused counselling are available for individuals and couples. Self referrals are welcome. Confidential services include pre-relationship counselling, treatment contracts, Ulysses Agreements, crisis planning, problem solving support, information and referral. Day and evening appointments are available at no cost.

<sup>1</sup>Decima Research, Informal/Family Caregivers in Canada Caring for Someone with a Mental Illness, Health Canada, May 2004.

<sup>2</sup>Schulze Monkong et al. 1996; Salokangas 1997; Hagner and an der Heiden 1997 in Jungbauer et al, The Disregarded Caregivers: Subjective Burden in Spouses of Schizophrenia Patients, Schizophrenia Bulletin, Vol. 30, No. 3, 2004.

<sup>3</sup>Halford, B., Brief Therapy for Couples, 2001.

<sup>4</sup>Hell, 1982 in Jungbauer et al.

<sup>5</sup>Jungbauer et al.

<sup>6</sup>Jungbauer et al.