

SCENE

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Christine Michaels and Lonne Sterling, Licensed Mental Health Counselors (LMHCs) and Certified Employee Assistance Professionals (CEAPs) have worked in the mental health, employee assistance and substance fields for over 25 years. They are in private practice providing clients with outpatient mental health counseling and small businesses with employee assistance services. Together they have established a reputation as dynamic professionals, each bringing unique and varied experiences to the partnership. Lonne was Director of Manatee Glens' Employee Assistance and Outpatient Programs, and successfully managed EAP and Managed Care product lines for 19 major firms and 20 national affiliates. As a Certified Relapse Prevention Specialist, Christine has extensive experience working in addictions with particular expertise in substance abuse assessment, early intervention and prevention. Clinically, Christine is highly skilled in utilizing a brief therapy, solution-focused

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The Meaning of the Odd Bead

by Christine Michaels and Lonne Sterling

About 10 years ago, Chris was traveling in Kenya and, as usual, was shopping. In the Masai Mara, there are no malls. Instead, shopping is done predominantly in the open marketplaces. Of course, being a typical female, she immediately gravitated to the jewelry stalls. The Masai are expert craftsmen at creating exquisite beaded jewelry. One particular bracelet caught Chris' attention and, without hesitation (the price being right), she purchased it and slipped it on her wrist. Back at the tent that evening, while dressing for dinner, Chris noticed an imperfection in her bracelet, one odd colored red bead stood out among all orange ones. The evening was ruined. Chris was unable to rest until she could exchange the bracelet for a new one. The very next morning, even before breakfast, she took a taxi back to the market. Locating the same vendor, Chris requested replacement for the defective bracelet. The Masai laughed and shared the meaning of the odd bead with her. The Masai are humble people. They believe we must always be mindful of our humanness, and so they intentionally add an odd colored bead to all of their adornments. This reminds them that being human means being imperfect and our beauty and our uniqueness reside in our imperfections. How wise.

Today, more than ever, we seem to be confused as to what it means to be human. As therapists, we are constantly asked by our clients, "Am I normal?" and if not, "Am I mentally ill?" We all seem to think that there is a standard of normalcy and others have achieved it. It has been our observation that the only normal people are those you don't know very well.

Some clients feel that to be normal means to be perfect and come into therapy believing this would be an attainable outcome. The fact is, perfection does not exist for any of us; normal is a state of feeling, not a state of being. The only way to feel normal is to accept and embrace our imperfections.

A more appropriate question would be "Am I healthy?" We will ask this of our physicians about our physical health, why then is it not a question that applies to our mental health? We know we are not physically healthy when we feel pain, when we cannot function at the same level as we usually do and our daily routines are restricted, when we have to make accommodations for discomfort and when our handicaps impact those

around us. Without a moment's thought, most of us will communicate our physical problems to others and seek medical help. So now the question is again, when our mental health is impaired, why are we reluctant to seek the help we need?

Sadly, mental illness continues to carry a stigma. Historically, if the mentally ill weren't thought to be witches and burned at the stake, they were institutionalized and treated like outcasts. So it is no wonder that people were afraid to admit to emotional concerns. Today, however, even though the treatment of those with mental illness has dramatically improved and there is a greater willingness to seek help, many of the old perceptions still exist.

In this day and age the majority of people with mental illness are not hospitalized. In fact, most treatment is provided in an outpatient setting, in attractive and comfortable offices on a strictly confidential basis. No longer are clients in therapy for years on end, for several sessions a week. Instead, counseling is brief, result-oriented and solution-focused. Now, many are quickly helped with a combination of therapy and a variety of medications that can often easily be monitored by a psychiatrist or a primary care physician.

Today it is not only those with mental illness but those having difficulty coping, for example, with career pressures, family issues, communication/relationship problems and concerns about aging who are recognizing the benefits of therapy; that their mental health is at stake. Emotional pain has become as real to them as physical pain. They are realizing that these everyday life stressors are impeding their ability to function at an optimal level, restricting their daily routines and forcing them into dysfunctional behaviors that, in turn are seriously impacting their jobs, their families and their lifestyle. They are more comfortably communicating their concerns to others and seeking professional help.

These are the folks who are accepting their fallibility and their humanness, no longer seeking perfection or normalcy but reaching for an attainable goal—good mental health and an enhanced quality of life. These are the folks who see the "odd bead" as a representation of their beauty and uniqueness. fulfilling lives.