Disability and Denial

by Michael Gordon, Ph.D.

My mother shook her head in mournful reflection: "If only we could find David a program that would prepare him for college, maybe he could learn a profession."

Her comment stopped me cold. David had graduated from high school, but under special circumstances and thanks to a small army of tutors and the beneficence of the local school system. While he had much to offer then as now, he was not college material, to put it mildly. Anything in his life that required him to process information, communicate clearly, or manipulate numbers was daunting for him. Anyone spending even a few minutes with David would know that his life course would take him on a tack more vocational than professional.

As she turned for a response, I found myself at a loss for words, at least kind ones. What came to mind fell more along the lines of "Are you nuts?" I didn't quite know how to tell my otherwise highly intelligent and insightful mother that her dreams of a post- secondary education for David were way, way out of bounds. And so I didn't. I just mumbled something about how we might want to focus more on helping him keep his job at the supermarket.

My mother's difficulty fully accepting David's limitations were usually kept well under wraps. But it wouldn't be unusual for her to express what I came to label in my clinical work as "If Only's." We'd be talking about David's struggles, and she'd say something like, "If only we could have gotten him into that special preschool" or "If only his neurologist had started anticonvulsants earlier." At the heart of each musing was the (unrealistic) notion that David's limitations would be remediable "if only" she and my father had made the right decisions. But, of course, David's limitations were not benign. While not devastating, they were certainly sufficient to forever preclude admission to postgraduate training.

When we trade reason for whimsy, the exchange serves a purpose. My mother's fantasy about David going to college was just that – a dream that was born of her refusal to fully acknowledge the reality of his limitations. She couldn't let go of the notion that David could be normal – if only. It was important for her to cling to the hope, the comforting self-delusion, that miracles might happen, notwithstanding the improbabilities. As such, she acted like so many of us when we are confronted with painful circumstances. She let a gauzy fantasy salve a reality too harsh to manage comfortably.

Most parents will find a way to blame themselves for whatever might have gone wrong for their children. I have heard parents express remorse for passing along a genetic condition, when they had no control over how their DNA combined. A mother once told me she'd never forgive herself for a taking a glass of wine during her pregnancy, even though the likelihood of a single chardonnay causing learning disabilities is beyond remote. The capacity for a parent to assume culpability is boundless. They work their way back along the chain of events until they can grab hold of a link that has their name etched upon the steel.

When parents are stuck in guilt and denial mode, it becomes harder for them or others to help the cause. Children won't make much progress if their parents are ambivalent, unsupportive, distracted, hostile, externalizing, reactive, depressed, minimizing, unmotivated or impatient. Children won't even arrive for treatment on a consistent basis if mom and dad are too busy hiding from reality or chasing illusory solutions.

I'm a lifelong fan of denial as a way of dulling the pain and infusing hope for a better outcome. I don't blame anyone for endeavoring to make the bumps of life smoother. But the point of diminishing returns looms large when denial stands in the way of healthy coping. It's fine to see the world through those rose-colored glasses if you remember that the tint of the lens impacts your perception of reality.

Effective problem solving, regardless of the circumstances, requires a clear-eyed acceptance of the facts at hand. In my experience, confronting those realities squarely is always the best first step toward progress.