

Excerpts from On The Edge Of Darkness (Doubleday 1994)

## CHAPTER 5. EFFECTS ON CAREER

### ALBERT SHANKER

At some point you have to make the judgement whether depression, in some very serious way, adversely affects your ability to carry on a particular job, and depending on past patterns of behavior it either has or it hasn't. I've worked with people on the job who have had emotional problems where it might have taken away from the job at certain times, or it might have lowered their effectiveness, but it was not destructive to the jobs. There would be certain times when I know that during this period, I can't count on this person, but it didn't do anything bad to me or to the organization or to any of his colleagues or to anything else, it was just that that person was consumed with something else, and was not available to do this job. I've dealt with people whose emotional problems led them to turn on me, turn on the organization, to betray, to be very, very destructive. You have emotional problems in both cases somewhat, but very, very different in terms of what the impact was on personal relationships and organizational relationships. But there are no generalizations. Of course you can have betrayals by people who are not emotionally disturbed. And lack of effectiveness.

You have to ask yourself whether you are attributing something to the illness or disturbances that can happen without it. One person who was very disturbed took a lot of information and secret from the organization and turned them over to competitors. On the other hand, people did similar things who were not disturbed at all, who were just personally ambitious.

## 6. OVERCOMING STIGMA

### ALBERT SHANKER

I've been around long enough, done enough things so I feel perfectly at ease talking about these things. I don't feel it's going to change any attitudes or relationships or anything else.

It can touch me, you know, I have to run for election, I'm a political figure. You can be successful for a long time and yet attitudes can change very quickly. In an awful lot of competitive situations in the world, people will use anything they have against you to gain an advantage. It would always be a matter of chance how someone might use this information about you.

I don't know that you can really combat it. What can you do? People can use anything. Suppose it weren't this, they could take any personality trait that any person has. What some people see as leadership, other people see as over-aggressiveness, or dominance, or authoritarianism. What other people see as thoughtfulness, some people will think of as moodiness or as being withdrawn. For every trait, one can have a positive or a negative characterization of it. It's a matter of interpretation. It all depends on the rationality of the people who are dealing with the issue. Thoughtful people have some notion about the range of what happens to most people some time during their lives. They treat that as another factor to consider, but if it hasn't shown to be of any great importance, they don't weigh it very heavily.

## **16. EXISTENTIAL BLUES**

### **ALBERT SHANKER**

After that earlier period, [my teenage depression] was transformed into a search for different types of religious experience. I started reading a lot of religious literature, started going to all kinds of churches, and I got out of myself into an external search. It became an important part of who I am, not in terms of religion or spirituality, but in terms of a restlessness of ideas, of looking at things from different perspectives. It started with religious things because that was very important at home. In fact, it's very hard to distinguish if the religious aspect was an expression of the search for meaning, which I think it probably was, or to some extent extreme rebelliousness, because to come from an Orthodox Jewish home and start visiting churches is a very rebellious act. There wouldn't be many that would top it.

## **21. CHILDREN WITH DEPRESSION**

### **ALBERT SHANKER**

"Why are people treating me this way? Why are they beating me up?" I thought as I walked back and forth over the Queensboro Bridge. "What's the matter with me?"

We were the only Jews in a working class neighborhood in New York City, which at that time was dominated by the radio voice of an anti-Semitic priest. Every day, I got the hell beaten out of me, the kids wouldn't play with me, and I grew up in a home where there was constant internal conflict. Part of the deal of my mother's marriage to my father was that her mother stay with us. Well, she stayed, but through all those years, my father never spoke to my grandmother as we all lived together in a tiny apartment.

So there were all of the tremendous emotional tensions in the family, and the minute I was outside, I had the hell beaten out of me, or nobody played with me. Where the hell was I going to go?

We lived right near the Queensboro Bridge and many times I walked back and forth over the bridge. I have vivid memories of those times, of my thoughts, of the constant internal movies about the conflicts in the family, about not having friends and being lonely or being beaten up. One time, I was actually hung up by my neck on a tree. Fortunately, my sister came out and discovered me and very quickly got me down.

A large part of this has to do with being the only Jewish family in the neighborhood at a time when anti-semitism was very high, especially among the poor and working-class people. There were a lot of discussions at home about the rise of Hitler, and what life was like when my parents lived in Czarist Russia. My mother had thirteen sisters and brothers and only two of them survived, so that was another thing that flashed before me as I would walk that bridge.

When I was about seven or eight years old, we had a radio, which was very rare in our neighborhood in those days, and because of that loneliness, the radio became my best friend. I listened to all sorts of things -- series, plays. I started to become interested in news programs very early on. But one of the things that started happening was that I'd walk in my sleep and turn on the radio, and my mother was so frightened by that behavior, feeling that the radio had some sort of a magical and evil influence over me, that she would pull the tubes out of the radio for months at a time. It was like destroying my best friend, and then I would throw things and break things.

I was very close and very open with my mother. We had a silent agreement that no matter what I did, if I talked to her about it, I would not get punished. She would sit down with me and ask, "Tell me what you're thinking," or what you're doing. That was very helpful. We might have been talking about lack of friendships early on, we might have

been talking about me constantly being beaten up, or even talking about feeling lonely when friends aren't around.

My mother saw the loneliness. She saw the outbursts. She was worried about the radio bit. So she actually took me for psychological testing. I don't know what they told her. "He's a bright kid; he has some problems, but he'll be all right." That sort of thing.

My parents placed a very high value on school. English was not spoken at home, and I entered school not speaking any English at all. I had a number of teachers who were really wonderful, who reached out and did everything they possibly could have, but there were also some who made fun of my accent and who would organize the other kids to beat me up.

There were basically no friendships. There would be people who would be friends for three days or a week. Then the other kids would say, "Beat him up." And here I was the tallest kid on the block. I had eczema when I was a kid, so when my mother had to go to work, I was tied down, so I wouldn't scratch the eczema and develop sores. I don't mean with chains and ropes; it was done nicely with pillows. Essentially, I was immobilized so that I wouldn't scratch. I was very tall, I was extremely clumsy, didn't have the coordination that the other kids did. And I had no friends.

Then, as a young teenager, I threw myself into the Boy Scouts, and unlike other Scouts for whom it was just a place where you came Friday night or went to a patrol meeting, I ate it all up. World War II had just started and the Scoutmaster got drafted. I was tall, six-foot-three at eleven-and-a-half years old, so I became the acting Scoutmaster, just because of my size. I organized two troops and a Cub Scout pack, and led hikes on weekends and collected papers for the war efforts. That pattern persisted later on in college, and then after I started working, I became active in the union. I made a number of close friends in the Scouts, and at Boy Scout camp, and after that, friendship was never an

issue. In fact, I still get together several times a year with some of the fellows I knew back then.