

Peer support group helps transform life

by Bob in California

I started dealing with mental illness as a child. Now I know that my mom was diagnosed with manic depression in the early 1970s. My brother and I became a release for her maniacal rages. Beatings, screaming, hunger, and neglect are the best way to describe my childhood.

At the age of sixteen, I was able to live with different families until I graduated high school. During my high school years, I had many friends and was twice the wrestling team captain with an undefeated senior season. I was off to wrestle in college but never made it. Perhaps this was the first of many delusions to come. At age 28, I had a house, a lovely wife, a teenage stepdaughter, and two nice cars in the driveway. I would make the comment that I left all the insanity behind me. My sleep patterns started to change. I'd sleep for three days and never feel rested. Other times I would have a terrible time getting to sleep or wake every ten minutes in a panic, looking at my alarm. These sleeping patterns worsened. I started to decline in my decision making and attitude towards my family. Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde had moved into my house. It finally came to a head and I had to leave the house. My wife agreed that I was always a good husband and good stepfather. However, I was no longer able to take care of my family. The next two years we lost our house, business, and our finances became a mess. It was time for me to die. I had made a promise to my doctor that if I really felt suicidal to come to him. I kept my promise. I stood in his office and said if you don't get me some help, I am headed to the Bay Bridge to jump off! He shockingly looked at me and knew I meant it. By the end of the night, I was taken into a room of three sleeping men. I told myself not to talk to anybody or give them any private information. I spent the next seven days locked up in two connecting hallways. No cards, flowers, or get well cards. I had a couple of visitors the last two days and was fearful of being released. I made it out the door, no welcoming party, just my truck and me. The next two years brought the reality of living with a chronic severe mental illness called bipolar. All was to be lost. My next two years were spent living in the back room of a friend's house. I would give him money when I could, which was not very often. Thanks to his kindness, it was the only thing that kept me from sleeping in the streets. Most of my time was spent in Barnes & Noble Book Store. My only goal of the day was to make my bed that had imprisoned me for the last two months. If I made my bed, I would not crawl back in it. My bed is still made every morning. I spent two years working a little here and there for enough money to get by. Most of my time was dedicated to a cup of coffee and reading as many books on mental illness as I could find. My reads started with psychology and the stories of those that were or had dealt with mental illness. Then I started to read about the therapies, techniques, medications, strategies, and then religion, philosophy, art, anything that got me closer to an answer of why I was who I am. I walked into a peer support group and it helped change my life. I met others that have lived my life. Telling about the losses, behaviors, frustration, confusion, and despair. In the group, we would talk about embracing moments, stays in the hospital, and the poor decisions we had made. The group consisted of men and women of all backgrounds, races, and socioeconomic backgrounds. This was the place for my healing to begin. Stigma is a very high hurdle for many to overcome. It creates a terrible anxiety in decisions of disclosure. Should work be told? Should I tell my kids? How will people look at me? I became the guy in the corner bugging everyone to just "tell" so the stigma doesn't continue. I realized that if

we hold a stigmatizing view of ourselves, then how can we expect others to accept us? By a series of miracles, I was asked to be part of an outreach program (In Our Own Voice) that has two mental health consumer presenters go out into the public and talk about their experience. It is an interactive program that allows the audience to ask questions openly and be exposed to an individual with a mental illness. The program has remarkable results for the audience as well as the presenters themselves. A year later, I was on an airplane headed to St. Louis from my home state of California. The organization that sponsors IOOV asked to become one of three active California State Trainers. They asked me to become a National Trainer for the program. This included bringing the program to other states and a chance to travel. On that first trip to St. Louis, I had \$35 to my name. It has been a year now that I enrolled in a junior college. I finally realized that my disability has become my ability. I went on long-term disability and became a full-time student. I am majoring in psychology with a special interest in the mental health field. I had the opportunity to hear Jeff Bell speak at our school. He is the author of "Rewind, Replay, Repeat." Currently, I am a volunteer assistant on a project involving the stigma of mental illness at Cal Berkeley. Cal is doing a lot of research on the subject of stigma and how it affects the individual and community when dealing with mental illness. My life has been plagued with the abuse that mental illness can create. In my heart, I know there is a better way. Through compassion, education, understanding, and common goals, we can create a better system to help people. Together with my personal experiences and gaining of knowledge, a new day is coming. The individuals I mentioned before and all the others I did not are out there making a difference. Through contact and education I will be doing my part to secure a better future for the next generation of kids that deal with mental illness. Make your bed, fluff up the pillows, and remind yourself that all of what happens during the day, we can not control. Come home and crawl in your nicely made bed.