

## Finding strength from support groups

by Jan in Florida

In high school, drawing the window shades and listening to Rachmaninoff's "Isle of the Dead" on occasion could have been the beginning of depression, or just teen angst.

In my 30s, I was a daily drinker as were most of my friends, and I was trying various self-help programs to feel better. Apparently my use of alcohol was an attempt to self-medicate the mood swings, as many psychiatrists informed me, though I didn't drink while depressed only when manic. Then alcohol lost its ability to stop me from being out of control. It's my personal opinion that underneath every alcoholic there is a mental illness.

At age 41, a business failure and split from my husband threw me into a severe depression on the heels of what I now recognize was mania. Looking over my old planners, I could see the pattern of four months of mania followed by six months to a year of depression. Then it was back to mania again. That same year I was hospitalized in Athens, Greece for a manic episode. Being hospitalized in a foreign country by my ex-husband was terrifying, but it was the first place my manic depression was recognized. My other hospitalization was in Florida in 1980. I have a son who was a teenager during this time and this was very hard on him. I finally learned that only time and my continuing stability would convince him to trust me again. My last manic episode was 1991. I lost my job, ended up housing eight round-the-world Whitbread Race sailors for three weeks during the Fort Lauderdale stopover, and ended up living on credit cards which eventually led to bankruptcy. Then I crashed into the inevitable depression. The second psychiatrist I saw in this period prescribed the right medications for me and I began to get better.

In all, I have had 11 psychiatrists -- only two of whom I considered good for me. I read all I could find about my illness. My best friend found a local support group where I got most of my information about the help available. There I learned the importance of compliance with my medication and acceptance of my illness and began my recovery. Fifteen years later, I now facilitate that group to make sure it is still there for others who need it as much as I did. I strongly suggest that others dealing with mental illness go to support groups where they will be with others who know exactly what they are going through and will encourage them to share information about treatment, help deal with family members and learn the life skills needed to cope with their illness. Also these groups are normally free.

Although I had a college degree I was still eligible for training through Vocational Rehab and chose to take computer courses. I was also volunteering at a new drop-in center. I encourage others to volunteer as they are recovering. You meet new people. They are happy just to have you show up and you begin to earn a reputation for reliability. You prove to yourself you are still competent. Somebody always knows someone who is looking for an employee to hire. I learned of an opening at the Mental Health Association of Broward County where my illness was an asset. In other interviews in the corporate world, I didn't get a call back if I shared my illness. My boss is the best advocate I have ever seen, and my mentor. My first assignment was to compile a booklet of mental health services and support in our county - the back cover of which lists famous people with mental illness.

Fourteen years later, I am still there running a unique program called, 9Muses Art

Center Gallery Frame Shop--a drop-in center with a focus on the arts, which offers art and music classes, exhibits, ceramics, yoga, as well as support groups.