

## Grateful for the life I now have

by Bonnie in Pennsylvania

I have lived a life that I would not want anyone to live. At the age of 13, I went on my first diet even though I was not overweight. This was when my life began spiraling out of control. It took about four years to get a diagnosis and that diagnosis was anorexia nervosa. I went from 110 pounds to 90 pounds to 69 pounds over an eight-year period.

I started abusing laxatives around the age of 15 because I could starve myself only for so long. I would steal them and melt them in the microwave oven. At one point in my life I was taking about 500 a week. I became bulimic. I could at least eat, and I would take laxatives so not much food would absorb into my system.

I also did what I called anorexic exercises, not much quality but a lot of quantity. As I got older, I found more mature ways to harm myself. I would overdose on medication either prescription or over the counter. If I had one pill, I took one pill. But if I had 25 pills then I would take all 25. I was extremely impulsive and to numb the pain I was in, I would also cut myself. The cutting was a relief more than it was painful.

From the age of 13, I started to hear a voice in my head. It was a male voice and it frightened me. I told no one for ten years. I truly believed that everyone had a voice in their head that told them what to do. Unfortunately, the voice I heard always told me to do destructive things. I would feel pressure in the left side of my head. This was the side I would hear the voice. The louder the voice, the more the pressure, until I would act on what the voice was saying. This was the pattern for many years.

When I was 17, I was admitted to a psychiatric hospital for the anorexia. Then for the next 20 years I went in and out of psychiatric and medical hospitals for my psychiatric diagnoses. I was hospitalized 40 times in 10 different facilities. Twice I was committed to a state hospital. The first time I was there for 92 days and the second time I spent 11 1/2 months as an inpatient.

Why was I so sick? I think it was a more than one factor. As a young child I was sexually abused. Fortunately it was not an immediate family member. However, the abuse traumatized me. I also believe like medical illnesses, we can have a predisposition for psychiatric illnesses. I believe these factors and possibly others were the reason for me getting so sick. It is hard to explain what I went through in those 20 years and for people to fully understand the devastation I suffered. As I became more and more self-destructive, I was treated less and less like a human being. Along with the many hospitalizations went treatment that was also traumatic. Because I acted out impulsively I also spent a lot of time in seclusion. I was tied to beds, restrained to beds, stripped, searched, locked in rooms, and medicated until I forgot days of my life. I was told my behavior was so bad that this is what needed to be done. I see it as more abusive than therapeutic.

When I was 26 years of age my father died. I was devastated and really started to decompensate. I ended up in a psychiatric hospital close to home, and I acted out impulsively by pouring a teapot of hot water on my head. I gave myself first, second, and third degree burns. The treatment for that (and I use that term loosely) was to keep me on the locked unit and treat my burns, and during my time of healing, I was locked in a seclusion room for 32 days. I was then sent to the state hospital. You can be the judge of this type of treatment. Each place I was hospitalized I had at least one

person who took a real interest in me. Even though I was told many times that I was hopeless, worthless, and useless I had something inside of me that would not let me believe the negative comments.

I could not accept the idea that I was going to live my life more in hospitals than out of hospitals. There had to be something else. I had minimal family support but I was driven to what I always called "getting to the other side." I never quite had an image of what this would be like, but I was going for it. My diagnoses varied from anorexia nervosa, bulimia, post-traumatic stress disorder, dissociative identity disorder, borderline personality disorder, generalized anxiety disorder and, more recently, obsessive compulsive disorder.

My prognosis was always very poor, but I still had dreams. I wanted a college education and I wanted to live on my own. After 10 tries and over an 18-year period, I received a B.A in Social Work. I had always wanted to do some type of advocacy work. To me it was not right that I had to fight so hard against a system that was supposed to help me. Many times, I was seen as "non-compliant," but I saw it more as wanting to have a say in what was going to happen to me. I was not very respected as a mental health consumer so I got a degree to be a professional and hopefully then I would be accepted.

Fast forward to now and life could not be better. I have a part-time job. I own my own home and I have a good group of friends. The relationship I have with my brothers is probably better than ever. I am more content than ever with my life. I have one of the nicest family doctor's anyone can ever have. He has spent the last 3½ years of my life walking my journey of recovery with me. My family doctor, my therapist, and my former pastor are a lot of the reason I am doing so well. My faith cannot be minimized in this journey either. When I met these three people, they believed that I was worth the time. Their support was very unconditional and this helped me believe more in myself. It was more of a partnership and I was a very active participant. After all, it's my life. I have reached the other side, and I am grateful each and every day for my life.