Believing in myself

by Mary Theresa in Pennsylvania

For much of my life I did not realize I had worth as a person. It prevented me from using and improving my talents. I was always living in fear even in the most common situations. In my relationships, I was undemanding. I felt I didn't have any rights. I did not know I had the right to have wants. I did not have the ability to resolve any differences or conflict. Instead, I would be resentful and not recognize that I was pushing down anger.

In school, I would always strive to be the best. If I had any difficulty, I did not know to ask for help. I felt this as a personal failure – the feeling of not being good at something made me a bad person.

I have worked in different jobs as either a secretary or as an administrative assistant. In the past, I was an overachiever at work. I would do more than my assigned work without pay. My work was one area I could feel confident because I knew I was good at it. But it was a separate issue to relate to others at work – both socially and as a co-worker.

I believe I suffered from depression from the age of four or younger. I am the youngest in a family of six children. I lived in an extremely abusive household, but did not realize we were abused. The abuse was verbal, physical, emotional and sexual. I was taught my role in life was to serve others--mainly my mother.

Starting at age four I liked grade school, but learned early to observe other children to see how I should act. I would lie about my home situation. I did not experience the freedom of childhood but outside the home, I pretended I did. My illness started to affect me to a much greater degree around age 12. It was much harder to keep up the facade that my life was much the same as my peers. I was both extremely nervous and depressed. I struggled every day to face normal social challenges.

Filthy language was ongoing from my parents. They would constantly argue sometimes for hours with horrible, filthy and sexual language, as well as physical fighting. This was from the time of my earliest memories and continued throughout their lives. At this time, I had no diagnosis. I was abused and ridiculed at home if I would have asked for help. I dared not speak to anyone outside my home. I was commanded to keep our home life a SECRET.

I married at the age of nineteen. I chose my husband because I knew he would never deliberately hurt me. I told him before we married that I would never live in an atmosphere where there would be cursing, physical fighting and abuse. Unfortunately, I was unable to remove myself from my parents' strong hold on my life. I would say for the next 12 years my priorities were first --taking care of my parents, 2nd -- my children, and 3rd -- my husband. I did not even consider that I needed to care for myself.

When I was 26, my sister, Nancy, at the age of 34, committed suicide. This affected me greatly and I should have received help. I did not seek help nor was it an accepted process in the culture of that time in our small town. When I was age 40, my favorite aunt started spending a great deal of time with my family. For four years she gave me the gift of mothering I had never known. When she died I began going into a deep

depression. Also at this time, I had serious medical problems. I had a herniated disk and was dealing with severe pain and very limited mobility. A year after my aunt died, I started to go to a counselor. Basically, at this time, I was just skimming the surface of my problems.

Our medical insurance did not cover my treatment at all. After a year, my symptoms became much worse and I was seen by a psychiatrist and hospitalized the next day. I was feeling totally worthless and hating myself. I was bulimic, anorexic and self-mutilating. I had severe insomnia. I wanted to just disappear. I did not think of it as suicide. I just wanted to disappear and have my husband and children and other loved ones just accept it as though I had never been.

At my initial visit, my psychiatrist asked me if he could trust me to get through a week without driving my car off the road. My answer was "no" and I was hospitalized the first time for 17 days. I received both individual and group art therapy and relaxation therapy, in addition to conventional therapies. At this time our insurance would pay for hospitalization, but not outpatient therapy. At one time, my private therapist was carrying a balance of over $2,000 for me.

Through hospitalization and ongoing therapy, I started to allow myself to speak of my past. For a long period of time, I would sometimes self-mutilate or purge due to my guilt of breaking the silence. Within a period of three years, I had two out of body flashbacks. Before undergoing therapy, I don't know if I would have believed someone if they had told me they had had this experience. Ultimately these flashbacks were a good thing, but at the time, I was experiencing a great deal of fear and distress.

From 1994 to 2001, I was hospitalized 13 times. I have not been hospitalized since 2001. If for some reason it would be necessary, I would not consider it a failure as I did early on in my recovery. I take psychiatric medication and have ongoing therapy as needed. My diagnosis is post traumatic stress disorder and major depression.

I have a loving relationship with my husband of 38 years. I have two children and one wonderful grandson. I am an artist. I have worked part time for a mental health agency for the past 7 years as a social aide. I attended training to be a certified peer specialist. When funding becomes available, I will work mainly in the peer specialist capacity.

I strongly believe my love of reading from an early age is what kept me sane. I am astounded and proud that I have survived my difficult upbringing and the effects of it in my life. I am calmer, can accept praise and believe good about myself. I am kind. I have hope for the future. I will help others with mental illness through my training and experiences.

Those with mental illness should not be looked down upon. I want society to know as person with a mental illness, I have lived a productive and satisfying life.