

"Just because I have a mental illness does not mean that I am not a successful human being."

by Bonnie in New Jersey

I am 32-years-old and am working towards recovery. I have not always believed in recovery. It has been a journey and to me, recovery is a journey with its ups and downs, as is life.

I have been battling emotional challenges for the better part of my life. My earliest diagnosis was ADHD at the age of 4, along with a learning disability. I learned as a young child how to combat the illness and continue to try and try. I was quite successful in school. I was taught never to give up and to fight against the system, especially when my parents and I would be told that I wouldn't be able to do something because of my disability. I learned to ask questions when I had questions, and I was a very successful student.

Along my college path, I ran into many stumbling blocks where I met up with the notion of having to take psychotropic medication. I was never specifically against it although I must say that there were medications that I was adamant against taking; I didn't know why, but in later years, I learned that when I would have a gut instinct about something, I had to learn to listen to myself. If I did not listen, I would pay the price.

I had to take off a semester in college and did a day treatment program because there was nothing else that I could do at the time (besides sit at home, which I wasn't allowed to do). I graduated Summa Cum Laude from college. And as we all awaited "Y2K," I was terrified of what I didn't know. Only four days later, I ended up having my first psychiatric hospitalization. That day began a terrible series of days, months, and frankly years of awfulness. I dealt with the system and along the way, my parents were told to institutionalize me for months on end. My parents refused.

I met with one doctor after another for suggestions, and most of them came up with suggestions that would just cause me to get sicker physically. All at the same time, I was dealing with terrible physical issues that were becoming exacerbated by any medications I put in my body. However, I was not being validated. My physical issues were chucked up to being psychiatric issues, which they were not, but no one would do anything to help me. The stigma was awful. The following year, I had the quality of life of someone in their latter years. I was being told that my psych meds were making things worse for my body. I was being given a choice between feeling okay physically or feeling okay mentally. I refused to choose either. I said I would sooner be dead.

Well, after a while, I realized what I needed to do. I began to empower myself. I was involved with support groups and Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance. I began to educate myself as much as possible and learned to start listening to my body. I began finding doctors who respected me for who I was, loved me for who I am and began listening to what I was saying. And astoundingly, once I was listened to, I was also diagnosed correctly for the physical issues I was dealing with.

We still had to deal with the issues, but now, at least it wasn't psychiatric in nature. Starting to believe in myself was one of the best things I ever did for myself. Another wonderful thing I did for myself was to start advocating and speaking on behalf of myself and others. When a professional stated during a public lecture that people who have borderline personality cannot get better or are difficult, I "outed" myself right

then and there. That was a good thing. I no longer had to feel shame. Since that time, I continue to out myself to break down the stigma.

The stigma of borderline personality is absolutely awful. Many professionals I have dealt with have refused to work with me or worked with me until there was a problem in our relationship. I was always the one blamed for the breakdown of the relationship. And even recently, a relationship ended. However, I had a therapist, who specializes in BPD, tell me I was not in the wrong. BPD is on a continuum like most other disorders that exist. And I am not on the further end of this continuum. Mind you, I have my problems, but I do not have many of the typical characteristics. In fact, I'm too introspective as I end up beating up on myself when I shouldn't be.

Part of my coming to terms with this illness has meant realizing that I'm a good person. I have also realized that if someone is not going to work with me due to a diagnosis I have, that is their loss. I have found some phenomenal professionals who did and continue to work with me to this day and honor who I am and know all sides of me. They accept me for who I am. Today, I am involved in many types of work. I do quite a bit of volunteer work. I do some medical collection work for a family member. I am an assistant teacher for children who have special needs at a local temple and I tutor some of these kids outside. And I am the President of a Board of Trustees from a local chapter of DBSA that I founded in August 2003, one of the most enlightening things I have done in my life. That keeps me busy quite a bit of the time.

I am prone to having issues with relationships, but I work with my therapist through issues I have. One of my #1 values is communication so I am pretty good at trying to communicate about things. I find that I get hurt in relationships easily and am wary about entering into new relationships. I do not have a significant other, but I do not want one either. I like to be on my own quite a bit of the time. And although I am dependant upon my mother and father who I live with, I also know that I like my down time with no one around. I am creative and am able to get a lot done.

Psychology is a passion of mine and that helps me to help group members, people in general, and the kids I work with. I also nanny for children who have special needs. I continue to take medication. I believe it helps me but then again, I haven't been off since 1994, so I wouldn't know what I would be like without it. I continue to educate myself any chance I get. I work to educate others as well. I speak at professional conferences and I do professional trainings whenever I can. I know I am a teacher at heart. I know I was put here on this earth to help others.

I have gone through a lot of bad (and good) in my life and I am here to hopefully make things smoother for others who travel the same or similar path as I do. I continue to try to prove society wrong when I'm told I'm not good at something or I CAN'T do something. Just because I have a mental illness does not mean that I am not a successful human being and I think that all of us need to remember that and bring that back into the classroom.