Never give up on yourself or a loved one with a mental illness

by Gail in Florida

Thinking in retrospect, I can recall being a shy, nervous little girl. At an early age, I began pulling my own eyelashes out to relieve the pain. Shortly after my 13th birthday, my father took his own life. I was told to "pull myself up by my bootstraps" and to get over it. I received absolutely NO counseling or help. We were poor and in debt. I don't blame my mother. She was suffering in her own hell from his action. The rest of my teenage years were spent running wild. I would drink, smoke cigarettes, and party. I think it was a way to ease the heartache. Even my own grandmother asked me, "What can I do to make you happy? Nothing makes you happy anymore." I suppose she saw what I couldn't.

Luckily, I settled down and earned an Associate's Degree. I had married and had one child. After his birth, I had Post Partum Depression. I was so scared to be alone with my own baby. After a few months, the bad feelings disappeared. I didn't ask for treatment because I thought it was normal. I eventually went to work as a Civil Servant. I both loved and hated my job. I was fatigued, angry, and sad all the time. I just chalked it up to being a mother and working full time.

I realize now that the depression started again about six months after starting this job. I was working in a separate building from the main government center. I applied for a promotion and received it. The same weekend, my family and I went on a short vacation. I was driving over the Sunshine Skyway bridge and had a full-fledged panic attack. I truly felt like I was going to die! I hyperventilated and felt faint. My heart was racing like a stock car. There is no place to pull over on that bridge. I had to finish the trip over it. When I got to the bottom, I pulled over and stopped. My husband had to finish the drive. I felt better after breathing into a paper bag for a few minutes.

Needless to say, fears of feeling that way again took over my thoughts. At night, I began to have attacks. I was scared to fall asleep. I was so sure that I would die if I did. I even gave up driving for a year. I was too terrified to drive. I was so sure that I would have a wreck from episodes. I had no idea what the problem was. I thought I was going insane. The attacks got worse over time and I mentioned it to my doctor. He gave me anti-anxiety medication. I was to gradually increase the dosage over time. I had horrible side effects. He prescribed another anti-anxiety medication, but told me I had to see a psychiatrist. I confided in a coworker. She had suffered the same way for years. She hinted that I may have Panic Disorder. The psychiatrist confirmed it. I tried just about every medication commonly given. I had to take a an anti-anxiety med for the panic disorder and an anti-depressant for depression. That was a very black, frightening time in my life. I felt like a lab rat. Some pills gave me night terrors, others made me too dizzy to function, and one even made my hair fall out. We went through many medications before finding the right combination. I gave up working after two years of suffering from panic attacks. I had no health insurance and relied on my husband's income. I became my own advocate. I researched self-help on the internet and bought many books. I practiced behavior modification and exposure therapy. I eventually felt well enough to return to college for a career change, but I suffered a setback and dropped out.

A lot of events happened, and I again went through major depression and anxiety. I was terrified of being alone. I could barely make it to the mailbox without a panic

attack. I even wound up in the E.R. because I thought I was having a heart attack. My psychiatrist reviewed my meds and adjusted them again. It took many weeks to adjust to the increase in dosage, but I was feeling so much better.

I have noticed that the depression is cyclic for me. Certain times of the year are huge triggers. I force myself to get up and out of the house. I returned to work for three months but resigned due to an extremely hostile work environment. I'm going back to college next week. I'm never giving up on myself. What has helped me the most is exposure therapy. I know my triggers, and I constantly expose myself to them. In other words, facing my fears and NOT giving into the fight or flight response. Prayer is also a great tool. I belong to an online anxiety group. I have a support network that extends beyond my immediate family.

I hate the way that mental conditions are viewed by society. Would you judge a diabetic? No. It's a chemical imbalance in the body. So is depression and anxiety. Too many people think that depression is voluntary. No person would choose this nightmare. Trust me in that. To truly heal, we must put ourselves first. It's not easy. Be strong, stand firm, and reach out when you need help. Never give up on yourself or a loved one with a mental illness.