

Recovery is a life long process

by Andrew in Michigan

I have been affected by mental illness as far back as I can remember. As a child I was so anxious about starting kindergarten, I stayed in pre-school one more year before I started real school. For the rest of my time in school I remember feeling more anxious about new things and situations than my friends, and every so often I'd get depressed and not want to interact with others.

As I reached my teens the depression got worse, to the point where I would concoct elaborate methods of suicide so as to make it look accidental to spare my family the heartbreak of having someone close commit suicide, as well as the stigma that it would bring. And also I wanted to keep my depression a secret from them. I felt like it was my fault I felt that way, and my fault for not being able to deal with what people would tell me was just part of being a teenager.

I formed a relationship with God, which helped me cope. In high school I met a special female friend who helped me realize that I was a good person, with lots of creative talent and intelligence. I finally started to look toward the future, and make plans for life after high school. I applied and was accepted to the college I liked best, and after the first couple weeks of intense depression from being away from home and not knowing anyone, I made friends and started to feel like I had a new life.

No one at college knew I was the quiet, shy kid of my past, so I was able to start with a new slate. I got involved with the peer mentoring group and was assigned an upperclassman as a mentor. He was (and is) one of the most amazing people I've ever met, and helped me to realize my potential and abilities. After telling him how hard the first couple weeks of college were and how they should match the mentors during the summer, he encouraged me to take a leadership role in the mentoring program. I did and became a program coordinator (along with 2 others) at the end of my freshman year. I was able to implement my ideas and the matches were made over the summer so that the mentors could be there to answer questions and even greet the freshmen on their first day at college, show them around, and make them feel they were not alone. I coordinated the program until I graduated.

My sophomore year I got involved with a girlfriend (my first serious relationship) and although not perfect, the relationship was going pretty well, until out of nowhere I was dumped for a guy my girlfriend worked with. I felt immensely stupid for not seeing it coming, and had a hard time dealing with it. I had sunk into a deep depression and spent my days and nights crying and feeling sorry for myself. I couldn't stop thinking about it. This happened right before summer break, and once home I got two jobs, working over 60 hours a week in order to occupy my mind and keep myself busy, as well as save money for a car.

In the fall as soon as I came back on campus, the sights and sounds immediately brought me back to the previous spring, and the depression and thoughts came back. I met another girl and started dating her, although I wasn't looking for a relationship, it served as a rebound for me. After Christmas break I was driving to her house on the way back to college to meet her parents, and while almost getting lost in downtown Saginaw, I had my first panic attack. I didn't know what it was at first, I had had anxiety attacks before but they went away and weren't nearly as severe, so not knowing what it was I assumed it was low blood sugar, or an asthma attack. After

getting to her house, my girlfriend took me to a mall, and I had another panic attack (to this day busy malls and urban traffic are triggers). When we got back to school the attacks got worse and more frequent and I lost weight.

As a psychology student I felt I should be able to cure myself, so I ruled out going to the campus counseling center. Until one day I was laying in bed, shaking from another panic attack and I had a moment of perfect clarity. I realized that I had to decide whether I was going to live or die. I could keep suffering the panic attacks, losing weight until I was hospitalized and dropped out of school, or I could fight back and meet this face on and get treatment and get better. The next day

I went to the counseling center, and after my first appointment, my therapist told me I was suffering from Panic Disorder, there was medication available I could start on right away, and that I was a strong and brave person to have made it as long as I did without treatment. I cried with relief. I started on an anti-anxiety medication within days and although the first 3 or 4 weeks were the worst I've ever had symptom wise (one day my pulse was 180 bpm) when it kicked in I finally felt relief from the panicky thoughts and depression.

My girlfriend didn't like the new me as I realized she was using me for sex and I was using her for an emotional crutch. When I told her I wanted to dial back on the physical aspect and focus on strengthening the relationship she said it was just the meds talking and threatened to leave, thinking I was too fragile to do anything, but I broke it off right then and felt my life was under my control.

I got into graduate school to work on my MSW, but after one and a half years on my medication, it stopped working, and the panic attacks and depression came back. Due to that, and other stresses in my life, (no money, death in family) I had to leave school after completing one year. I got on another medication, came home and got a good paying job, and after a year I felt like I was cured and I didn't NEED the meds anymore and cut my dose in half at first, then stopped them.

Soon after that, my company lost its contract and I was laid off, and my older sister got divorced, became an alcoholic and moved in with my parents, and my parents expected me to use my education to help her. Predictably, my panic attacks game back and after two trips to the ER, a psych nurse suggested a partial program which I got into and did a week of intensive outpatient care.

After that I realized my recovery may be a lifelong process, and accepted that the medications and talk therapy may be permanent. I've had ups and downs since then, struggled with stigma and prejudice. I switched off medication after the brain lightning (if you have taken SSRI's you might know what I mean) got bad, but got on a combo of meds and have been doing well. A month ago I got hired as a Peer Support Specialist with the community mental health in my county, and for the first time I feel like my experiences are an asset to work and not a liability. Although I don't have insurance, I can afford generic versions of my meds and still attend counseling.

I continue my path of recovery, and hope to eventually coordinate the peer support program, or become a therapist. I'd like people to know mental illness isn't a prison sentence, but can be an asset to your life.