

Dedicated to making the world a better place for people with mental illnesses

by Jennifer in Florida

At the age of 12, I began to have trouble with depression. This became a chronic problem for me, which eventually resulted in a suicide attempt at age 15. At the same time, I was developing anorexia nervosa, which I struggled with for many years. I was hospitalized for my eating disorder at age 17. I had also developed an addiction to self-injury as a teenager, something that I was able to completely stop doing when I was in my twenties.

Despite all these problems, I always knew what reality was. I did not hallucinate, have delusions, or lose touch with what was real, until I was in my twenties. That's when I developed Schizophrenia.

I started to think paranoid things about people being after me, the CIA tracking me, myself having a history of abuse which I blocked out of my mind, my thoughts being controlled by the government and other bizarre beliefs. I began to see the same colors everywhere, such as red, white, and blue everywhere I went. I began to think I was being followed at all times, by various people. I saw things which I did not realize until some years later, had been hallucinations. There was a bat in my room in the middle of the night once. Another time there was a bug.

The Schizophrenia started slowly for me. It took a few years before it became full-blown. At the age of 27 or 28, I began hearing voices. I also thought I was being communicated with directly by people on television and the radio. I thought that people could read my mind, and that I could read others' minds. I did not associate these symptoms with having a mental illness because, at the time, I did not possess that kind of insight.

After several hospitalizations, and a few suicide attempts, I eventually got to the point where I was completely suicidal, due to the auditory hallucinations I was hearing everywhere I went. I was told that there were concentration camps in the United States where people were being slaughtered, and that I was going to end up in one. I believed that I was pregnant, with a baby implanted inside me in a hospital - a belief that carried on for a few years. I believed on alternating days that I was Jesus Christ, Anne Frank and L. Ron Hubbard. While I had received psychiatric treatment for depression and my eating disorder in my younger years, and while I had been hospitalized multiple times in my twenties, I was not correctly diagnosed with Schizophrenia until I was 28 years old. After becoming acutely suicidal, I crashed a car on top of a 150 foot bridge, trying to drive over the guardrail. When that didn't work, the voices told me to buy a gun, which I did. I went to a shooting range and learned how to use the gun. I wrote out a living will, because I intended to shoot myself and did not want to be kept alive by machines if my method failed.

I wrote letters and bought gifts for my friends and family. But before I was able to go through with shooting myself, my family figured out what I was doing and called the police. I was taken in handcuffs to a hospital psychiatric ward. This time I would remain there for some time. I had a hearing with a judge who ordered long-term hospitalization. I remained hospitalized for five months. For the first time, I continued to take antipsychotic medication for months, and it turned out to work. I stopped

having my delusional thoughts, eventually, and stopped hearing voices most of the time. After being released from the hospital, I went to live in a group home for ten months. Following that, I got an apartment, which I rent from a local community mental health program. I have lived in it for two years.

While I was psychotic, I often ended up homeless. I lived in shelters, motel rooms, and the back of my car at different times in my twenties. I was evicted from two apartments because the landlords did not care that the reason I was not around to pay the rent was that I was in a hospital psychiatric ward. So I ended up losing many of my belongings, more than once.

Now, I have the ability to think clearly and hold a part-time job. I receive disability benefits which allow me to survive, and I pay my rent every month. I have only been hospitalized once in the past three years. As part of my recovery, I started to attend therapy every week. I continue to do that, as it helps me to figure out ways to cope with any symptoms I continue to have. My diagnosis was changed from Paranoid Schizophrenia to Schizoaffective Disorder. I started a support and advocacy group called DAISIES: Dedicated Advocacy, Individual Support, Independence, and Education for Schizophrenia, which meets at the local community mental health center's drop-in center. I have become an advocate for others with mental illness as well.

Medicare pays for most of my prescriptions, but not all of them. I lost Medicaid because I worked part-time and made a few dollars too much to be a recipient of SSI any longer, so my income has been cut back because of that. Life is rather difficult right now, because I do not have a job and I need to find one quickly in order to remain in my apartment. But I have faith in my own ability to work and to find employment somewhere.

I write a blog where I tell others about my journey with Schizophrenia. I have received emails and support from people who read my blog, and one of my pieces of writing is going to be published in a book soon, a fact which I am proud of. My blog was started when I was still psychotic, but it tells the story of how I got better with the aid of medication and therapy. It is called Inside My Mind and is located at <http://suicidalyetsane.blogspot.com>.

I feel that there is still a tremendous amount of stigma in our society against people with mental illnesses. After all, discrimination against us is basically the definition of the word stigma, which is saying quite a lot. I feel that we need to all contribute to the end of collective ignorance about mental illness by telling our stories to others, and letting them see that treatment can help and be quite effective, and that we are all human beings who deserve to be given the same human rights and respect as anyone who does not happen to have a mental illness.

I am dedicated to making the world a better place for people with mental illnesses, and I frequently send letters on this subject to politicians. I hope to eventually write a book about my story, to help others and to educate the public. Many changes have been made in the way the world treats the mentally ill, but we still have a long way to go. Now that I am doing much better, I have returned to college. Last semester I wrote a research paper on how the mentally ill are treated by the criminal justice system, which is a topic that interests me.