

People with mental illness CAN recover: I am living proof..,

by Edna in Tennessee

My name is Edna. I am a 47-year old single mother. My two children are grown, but have lived a life of confusion with my illnesses. I was a happy child, with a good life. However, in my teen years I started having bouts of sadness, depression, anxiety, and loneliness...even though I had a large family and many friends.

I married at 17, expecting the typical little white cottage with a picket fence, and a love that would last forever...didn't happen. My husband started physically and emotionally abusing me from day one of our marriage. Four months into the marriage, I was pregnant and after an extremely severe beating, I filed for a divorce. At 18 I was divorced, had a newborn baby to care for, and no income. I went into a depression, but it was actually a mild one compared to the ones to come later in my life.

Over the next nine years, every February I became depressed again, and it always lasted until June or July. It seemed the sunshine was the only thing that could make me feel better. I went through countless relationships and another two marriages, both abusive. I had little quirks, sure, but I myself didn't think they were all that bad. I was continually obsessive/compulsive about everything in my life. I made lists...so many lists. I couldn't function without my notebook and pen. I made a list of what was for breakfast, what we could have, what we did have, what we should have to eat. I did the same for every meal, every event, every chore, every day. Without my lists I felt something horrible could and would happen.

I had up periods and down periods. During the up phases, I found jobs, was very productive, began to dream of things I wanted to do with my life. I knew I was intelligent and talented. I became a workaholic, never able to do enough, always the perfectionist. Then the down would hit. I could feel it coming, and would panic...sending me into a complete tailspin. Then I'd lose my job, get behind on bills, just couldn't function. After would follow months of depression, anxiety, and loss of direction. I had my daughter in 1990, and in 1993 I finally went to a doctor, terrified that he would pronounce me crazy, and immediately call someone to take my kids away. He didn't.

He started me on antidepressants. Within three days, it was as if a fog was lifted from over my eyes. I could see colors again. I felt...that's it, I felt again. And I loved it. It was good. After a few months on the medication, the doctor started weaning me off of it. I was so scared that when I came off of it, that I would fall into the dark again. But I didn't, I was okay for almost a year before it started happening again. After that, every time I felt the fog coming over me, I wasted no time going to the doctor and asking for help. My family berated me for it, called me nuts, called me a druggie, told me to just snap out of it. I couldn't make them understand that I couldn't. I had no control over it. I felt sub-human, but was like a drug addict, in that I would do anything to get that happiness back...I'd take any amount of belittling to be happy and functional again.

I had to depend on my parents to help me with my children, with my bills, and with housing during every depression episode or panic attack. The medicine helped but after a while it wasn't helping as much, the symptoms were harder to control. The downs got worse and happened more often.

In 2003, after a year-long up where I had managed to obtain the career of my dreams, and financial security for the first time in my life, I suddenly got very ill physically. I spent several weeks in the hospital where I was diagnosed with a chronic and terminal illness. Going through all the emotional stages of this disease was horrible for me, and for my children. From that, I sunk into the deepest depression of my life. The medicines I had to take caused so many side effects, the disease caused so many symptoms. I lost my hair, I lost my teeth, I was malnourished but at the same time the meds made me gain 60 pounds.

I started having heart problems, and was diagnosed additionally with Fibromyalgia, Reynauds Syndrome, and a multitude of other syndromes. I was fired from my job, due to the amount of time I spent in the hospital. I lost my home, and lost my car. In essence, I lost my life. But I wasn't dead yet. I moved back to my home town, only to have to depend on my family to take care of me again.

The depression that set in was so deep, so severe, that I felt I was already dead. I wouldn't go out of the house, and refused to let anyone in the house. I just wanted to be alone, to suffer in peace. My kids tried to understand, but it hurt them so bad. I knew I had to have help dealing so I finally made that call to start counseling. I'm so glad I did! My counselor helped me learn ways to cope with all that was happening to me physically. She helped me start behavioral therapy, which made a big impact on my OCD symptoms. And she helped me to understand that I was NOT crazy. She explained how the chemicals in the brain work, and she taught me about the mental illnesses. I had been diagnosed with...clinical depression, OCD, generalized anxiety disorder, social anxiety disorder, panic disorder. She also explained that many of my symptoms, such as the list making, was my way of trying to retain some control over a life that was out of control.

Now I understood how and why, and was ready to work on recovery. Slowly, I began to overcome my symptoms, and started to re-build my life. Yes, I still have a terminal illness, and the doctors say there's nothing they can do for that. But I'm still alive. I just had to figure out how to live while I'm dying. I've gone back to work, in a Peer Support Center, and I love my job immensely! I look forward to getting up every day and living. I still have down times, but now I know what to do when I feel them coming on. Through my training at work, I've learned what's happening to me, why, and what to do to cope with it. I have co-workers who understand my physical and mental illnesses, and they help me through each day and encourage me to keep going.

I now advocate for people with mental illnesses, and am trained to teach coping skills to others. I'm trained as a Peer Counselor, and am a certified Bridges teacher. I'm also working towards certification as a Peer Support Specialist. Through my illnesses, I've found a way to help others, and a way to love myself again. It's been 5 years since my fatal diagnosis, and I'm still alive...and happier than I've ever been before in my life. People with mental illness CAN recover, CAN learn to cope, and CAN be functional members of society. I'm living proof of it.