

## "All of Our Walks in Recovery Look and Feel Different"

by Amber in Oklahoma

There is not a time that I can remember that I was not depressed. As a small child, I can remember crying and crying, but not knowing why I felt the way I did. Other children did not seem to have the same feelings that I did. I became known as "sensitive." By the time I was 17, I was not only sensitive, I was suicidal. I had decided on a plan and was scared. I told my mom that I was planning on killing myself if things in my life didn't change. She immediately sought mental health care for me from our primary care doctor.

I was sent to a psychiatrist and put on medication. My mom finally left my stepfather who had been abusing us both mentally and physically for the last 15 years. Still I was battling depression. I started to have nightmares and startled easily. I became more and more irritable. I started having panic attacks. I was diagnosed with PTSD and panic disorder. I got involved with a man who began to abuse me. I stayed in that relationship for 2 years. I didn't take my medications because he didn't feel I needed them. I suffered greatly the effects of my illness. My symptoms were at a full swing. I also didn't have insurance, making accessing health care very difficult.

Finally, I escaped this man and began to receive mental health treatment because I had insurance through the job I had. I started taking medications again and began to feel better.

Then I decided that I didn't need medications any longer and stopped taking them. In October of 2002, my mom died by suicide. She had bipolar disorder and decided that she could not fight that fight any longer. At that point, I hit rock bottom. I lost my job due to my illness. I couldn't maintain relationships and lost most of my friends. People didn't seem to want to be around me when I couldn't get out of bed or take a bath.

Finally, I decided that I WANTED to live. I began to seek services and started taking my medication religiously. I go to therapy and try to live a healthy lifestyle. I now consider myself in recovery. I know that people with serious mental illness can and do recover. I am living proof. I still experience symptoms, but I recognize when I need help and seek that support.

I work now as the coordinator of our state's Peer Specialist program called Recovery Support Specialists. I will complete my master's degree in Marriage and Family Therapy in November of 2006. I am a strong advocate not only for people living with mental illnesses, but also suicide prevention and survivors of suicide. I am married and have been for three years to a wonderful man who is also in recovery. I am a stepmom to a great 16 year old daughter. I love to read, play with my pets, and laugh.

If I could change one thing for people with a mental illness, I would want everyone to have a message of hope and recovery. I often wish that my mom could have had a recovery model. I wish that she could have had a peer specialist. I wish that everyone could have access to someone who inspires hope and wisdom in them. I want everyone to know that they CAN recover. I want everyone to know that all of our walks in recovery look and feel different. We take a different path and it's okay. I am hopeful that this message will reach as many people as possible.