

# Overcoming Depression: Medication and Counseling Are Key

by Kate in Pennsylvania

As a child I had severe mood swings, making my childhood an unhappy one. But my father didn't believe in psychology so I never received help. My first encounter with mental health care was during the failure of my first marriage. I was hospitalized for deep depression. There was no follow up and no medications prescribed after leaving the hospital. As a single mother with an undiagnosed mental illness, I was not functioning well. I moved to live near my sister and started working part-time. Her support was the only thing that made this possible.

Within three years I was married again. The pre-marital counseling opened up some emotionally painful issues and I quickly shut down. The underlying mood swings seemed to be better controlled with a home, child rearing, gardens and the veneer of religion. I had never understood the depth of my problems, and neither did anyone else. After 14 years, my second marriage failed, and I again faced the horrible black hole of depression. This time, however, it was accompanied with months of suicidal urges. I sought out my own help this time.

After two hospitalizations, I was finally on medications that helped. Talking was painful. One conversation with a counselor really made a big difference. The counselor said, "We want you to go to the hospital." I said, "I don't want to go." The counselor said, "We want you to call us if you feel like killing yourself." I said, "Why would I call you if that's what I want to do?" The counselor said, "The reason you should call us is because you don't really want to kill yourself; it's just distorted thinking."

Finally, at age 40, someone had given me something to work with. I fought the urges with that reasoning. I went to live with my sister. While still in a deep depression, I enrolled at a university. Five years from that point, I went from being essentially non-verbal to teaching college classes. What happened? Medications and counseling went hand-in-hand, but the real progress was made when I entered a program based on cognitive therapy, rational emotional Behavioral Therapy, family systems and developmental reconstruction. The program was geared towards abuse survivors. After nearly four years of videos on family dynamics, workbooks and weekly group sharing, the wall of silence was broken.

I was faced with other people's pain and started talking about my own. I learned the concepts of becoming aware of "arrested development" and its impact on my life, lowering my expectations, taking responsibility for my recovery, and hearing and refuting negative self-talk.

Other concepts also reframed my thinking. The most important thing was that these counselors validated my pain. I started living on my own and practicing the skills of balancing a life with mental illness. That is when I started doing my art. Now 8 years later, I know it is an important source of my well being and gives me a reprieve from the torment of mental illness. Teaching art takes me outside of myself. When I do my art, everything negative falls away. It's a resting place.

Now I am building on my confidence by teaching, doing and showing my art, and talking about my journey. To conclude, here are some things that hindered and helped along the way:

- Worrying about getting my medications because of not having prescription insurance has been a huge stressor.
- When mental health workers' attitudes were insensitive and unkind, I would question whether I deserved help. If they didn't listen, I wondered who would really care. It was helpful when a counselor was sensitive to my need to feel safe, believe what I said, and ask how I really felt about things. I was taught how to use cognitive sheets to work out problems and use them to this day.
- The education over the years about the disorder and its management, which fostered better life skills, gave me a large measure of control and respect.
- The crisis hotline and other support systems let me know I always have a safety net and alternatives.