

My Recovery



When one receives a mental health diagnosis or experiences their first "episode" (manifestation of the illness), as I did in 2001, everything in the world as we have known it changes. It is like transitioning into some other person who you do not recognize. "I lost me, I don't recognize this person living inside my body anymore," I commented to a friend. I simply had no way of knowing what my changed life would play out in the days and months to come.

Told that I had been diagnosed with Bipolar 2 Disorder, I was suddenly thrown in to a world as foreign to me as the language of my diagnosis. I felt very confused during this time. My family and I had to be educated about this "disorder". I was given many different pills and the hospital took multiple blood samples for tests. Each day I met with a nurse and a psychiatrist and was made to take part in walking outdoors as well as crafts and sports. These groups were not optional but mandatory

Thinking back to that very difficult time of my life, I am struck by the fact that I was not given any direction or program that might help me transition into everyday life. Discharge day came. Shaky inside with anxiety and a little high from the mania, I felt overwhelmed and a slightly scared about how I would cope once I was at home.

By the time I saw a psychiatrist 3 weeks later, I had already slipped into a depression. Fortunate that the antidepressants I was given did not put me right back into a manic episode, I came out of the depression two months later.

Still, I was a stranger to myself and without direction or structure to my life. I felt hopeless and frustrated. I kept saying to my psychiatrist, "Tell me what I am supposed to do?" He would repeat time after time, "Just do what is in front of you to do." I could not fathom what he meant.

I had started a program for people with dual diagnoses before I was hospitalized, and now returned to it. With the mandate from my kindly psychiatrist as a guide, I seized any opportunity to make my life better. For the next five years my mood was relatively stable. Three years after hospitalization I had to go off my mood stabilizer, but managed until some very stressful events happened in my life all at once, and I had a manic period that was almost as bad as my first episode. For two months I was unable to sleep, talkative, buying things, sorting things, and cleaning things excessively. Then I felt myself slipping into extreme depression. Getting dressed, showering, or even brushing my teeth were momentous chores, and I spent most of my time in bed. My partner threatened to leave.

Again, my reflection on this time is that – in spite of interventions by my psychiatrist, my partner, my neighbour and my daughter - I didn't have any tools, or know how to use anything to help stop this downward spiral.

It was at this moment that I remembered the Mood Disorders Association (MDA), a peer-support group that I had briefly attended in 2001. Promising my partner that I would go twice a week, I began a new variation of putting one foot in front of the other. But what valuable support I now received from this, a group

of my peers! I learned the value of networking and support groups. Members of the group shared information about available programs and knowledge and skills based on personal experiences. I learned to keep my eyes and ears open. Something would get my attention and I would ask, "What is that about?" I would say: "How can I take that?" Everything I ever learned, I learned from my support group." Not quite, but almost.

I heard about a writing class for mentally ill people and writing became part of my life. Involvement in the writing group led to a wellness recovery program,(WRAP), where I learned how to make and follow a daily wellness plan, recognize events that trigger my mood swings, and note warning signs of mania and depression. At MDA I felt understood. What I learned from others in my group made me hopeful.

I wanted my recovery to bring hope to others and I wanted to give back what I received from MDA. In the spring of 2007 I was asked to facilitate the Tuesday Mood Disorders Group at MDA. I took a peer support course offered through Vancouver Coastal Health and training to facilitate wellness recovery programs (WRAP).

Some of us from the writing group, along with our teacher/editor, published an anthology about our Mental Health. A second book about Recovery was published 18 months later. Through the writing of the first book, our editor connected with the University of British Columbia, and three of us spoke at their Health Conference last fall and at another workshop earlier this year. Through this I let go of my own personal stigma.

Even with my current physical health issues, I remain passionate about sharing the tools I have learned with others who suffer from mental health difficulties. This is where I want to be.

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