Your Employee and Family Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Stories of recovery from mental illness

Recovery from mental illness is not the same as recovery from, say, a broken arm. Natalie Jeanne Champagne, author of The Third Sunrise, A Memoir of Madness, explains,



The definition of recovery, the very roots of the word, mean[s] to be healed or to be cured. People are not cured of mental illness but we do heal, and we do recover. It's important to understand what the word recovered means when tied to mental illness. Recovering is the process you take to find wellness and stability. It is the months, the years, you work to find the right medication and balance in your life.

Donna's Story - Recovery from Bipolar Disorder, Dissociative Disorder and PTSD

Unfortunately, it is not uncommon for people to have more than one mental illness. Donna experiences bipolar disorder, dissociative disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Donna describes her life before recovery as a "living hell" – repeatedly in and out of the hospital and attempted suicide. Even her doctors thought there were times when she wouldn't make it through the night.

At age 24, Donna recalls,
I started going downhill really fast, I could not get control of any part of my life. Everything seemed to be too much of an effort and I began acting out in ways that I had never done before. I just didn't care about myself or anyone.

Through medication, therapy, a great treatment center and religious faith, Donna achieved a level of recovery.
Every day I struggle with keeping my symptoms under control. The [treatment] center has played a huge part in not only my life but my recovery. I know in my heart that if it hadn't been for the staff there I wouldn't be here today. I know that I did the work to get here but they are the ones who helped me put it in drive and when I got stuck; they pushed me, even carried me.

Today, Donna considers herself thriving both at work and home.
I have my symptoms under control and am stable now. It took a lot to get to this point. It took people believing in me. It took a huge effort on my part to want to learn how to get better and an even larger effort on my part to actually do it. No one ever told me that recovery was going to be easy but they did instil in me the belief that it would be worth every ounce of hard work that I put into it.

Katherine's Story - Recovering from Depression

Having achieved two bachelor's degrees and a master's degree public health, Katherine thought she "had the world by the tail." Although she had experienced dark feelings and insecurities before, she never would have believed they would lead to full-blown depression. But by the time Katherine was 28, her depression had impacted her life in a major way. She had been hospitalized numerous times, lost her apartment, job and benefits, ultimately forcing her to file for bankruptcy and move in with her parents.
I truly believed that any hope of having any semblance of a normal adult life was over and I would forever remain an adult-child dreaming of the life that could have been.

But at a hospital dialectical behaviour therapy (DBT) day-program Katherine attended, life began to turn around. Through the program's individual and group therapy (most helpful for people who have difficultly managing their emotions), Katherine learned new skills to manage and cope with her emotions and tolerate emotional distress. Eight years after her life fell apart, Katherine re-entered the job market and her life "took giant leap forward."

In Katherine's words,
Recovery is possible for most everyone because it is defined by the person doing it. There is no right or wrong way to recover - rather it is about living a life that has ups and downs, successes and failures, dreams and hopes - one that is fulfilling. It is about building or rebuilding a life in spite of being diagnosed with a mental illness. I never thought that I would be able to take the most disenfranchising event in my life, being diagnosed as seriously mental ill, and turn it into one of the most empowering.

These stories of recovery were provided by the Recovery Steering Committee of the South Carolina Department of Mental Health. Share them with those in your life to raise awareness, understanding and inspire.
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