

The Onset of My Schizophrenia

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My name is Leif Gregersen and I have been diagnosed with schizoaffective disorder and anxiety. I used to think a diagnosis like that was something like a death sentence, but in the time since I began to get proper treatment for my illnesses, my outlook has changed. When I was young, before my first serious psychotic break, I had no idea what it was like to experience schizophrenia. I denied it as something that happened to other people, to people who were weak. I felt that once a person went in that direction, they were to be shunned and cut out of my life. What I didn't know was that right outside the city I grew up near was a hospital that had almost as many staff and patients as the small town I grew up in and loved dearly.

What I also didn't know was that my great-grandmother and mother both likely had schizophrenia I was just never told. I knew there was mental illness in my family, which makes it much more likely that myself and my siblings would have an illness. When I first began to slip away from reality, I had no idea that my mind was a seething cauldron of confused thoughts and emotions. I blamed the problems I had with depression and poor self-esteem as a result of my dad's influence in my life. He had been very strict and at times seemingly cruel. I couldn't have been more wrong.

I have come a long way from being a patient living in total denial of his condition. That all was 31 years ago, though some memories still torment me. I was just 18 when my first serious hospitalization happened, and it completely altered the course of my life. Although I did get into a fight at school and struggled with the police and hospital staff when I was committed, I did relatively few bad things. But the small things I did, though the people I did them to likely don't even remember them, haunt me every day.

One such incident I can't stop thinking about was having delusional thinking, most likely added with some auditory hallucinations. I was at a local shopping mall as the mall was closing. Somehow, I thought I was supposed to go along with a young woman who worked in the food court. I don't know why no one challenged me, but I got

right into the van that she was riding home in and said nothing. Then, a little while later I looked at her and noticed she was sobbing and crying, afraid for her life. It didn't even hit me right away that she was scared of me. When I did realize, I got out of the van and never went near her again, but I still feel very guilty about it.

What led up to me going into the hospital was a very disturbing few days that were my last ones in high school. I wandered the halls, following people around I barely knew, acting strangely, thinking things that were completely out of this world. Those were days of horrible hallucinations and delusional thoughts. After seeing all that, I began to believe there had to be some kind of power greater than myself in this world. All of it had been too perfect, made too much sense and was so real.

Most people will tell you that they have never experienced psychosis, but the truth is, many of them have. They have just experienced it while they are sleeping. When someone is asleep and has a bad dream, often reality is suspended, you might experience emotions coming from out of nowhere that seem many times stronger than waking ones. You may dream things like you have a lot of money or a beautiful lover. Dreams or nightmares are a mish-mash of wishes unfulfilled, fears come to the surface, and they are incredibly real and very similar to people who are experiencing active psychosis. If you are able, you realize you are dreaming, wake up, and slowly come to realize you were asleep. When you have schizophrenia, you don't get to turn off the false reality, it stays until a medication can be found that lifts you out of it. It can take weeks, months, even years.

One of the key elements of getting help for a mental illness is to have a doctor you can trust, and another is to come to the realization that you need help, and perhaps most important, to be able to tell the truth to your doctor. I had come from a place of privilege. I lived in a well-off suburb and had a stable home and friends. When I was taken away from that, I went through a great deal of anger, hurt, and denial that kept me from getting the help I needed for years.

My first major hospitalization started out with me being locked on a small ward about 40 meters long, with three isolation rooms, a dining area, a smoking TV room, and three dorms. All of the walls were stained with greasy cigarette smoke and the building must have been 100+ years old. Many of the staff members were every bit as frightening as the patients. Some of them had spent their adult lives there, caring for people who responded poorly to the fact that they were locked inside 24 hours a day. Sometimes they were cold and callous to the needs of the patients, just marking time until their retirement. I was one of these very ill people, I just wouldn't admit it.

All the time I was there, it was like my brains had been scrambled by some powerful designer drug. Most likely, it was actually tranquilizers meant to bring me down from the manic part of my bipolar disorder. What was the worst part though was that there was a constant dialogue in my head, a stream of preposterous thoughts remarking on everything that I heard, said, or saw happen around me. It wasn't an audible voice though. It was like my brain was turned into two people, one being the thought generator that gave me all the false ideas, and another was the person tormented by the dialogue of preposterous ideas which hallucinations backed up.

There were many things I believed that were so strange because of my psychosis. It didn't help that staff members, especially the hostile ones, must have known I was trying to hide schizophrenia because at times they would tell me things like I was the King of Denmark or that a young woman I once had a crush on from my home town wanted to marry me.

One of the hardest parts of living with a mental illness that not only affected my behavior, but also made me

believe things that were very far-fetched, was that I have found it nearly impossible to try and reconcile my misdeeds, to try and make amends with people I know that I hurt. There were two women I went to school with and at odd times they had paid me compliments and made me feel special and then when I became very ill I tried to approach them. I believe this may have scared them, made them uncomfortable or worse. So, when I got in the hospital and had a great deal of time on my hands, I wrote to them. They may have forgiven me back then, but never in 31 years did they allow me to have even a simple conversation with them, so I could explain what happened, why I did what I did. It hurts to lose a friend, but when someone completely cuts you out of their life for things beyond your control, it feels like falling down a set of stairs and being kicked repeatedly.

I have come to a certain understanding of why people cut me out of their life. We all fear the unknown, mental illness is a frightening thing to deal with whether you have it or someone close to you does. All I can do is keep writing, keep working hard to spread the word about the horrible effects of stigma on those who suffer from a mental illness.

I am fortunate now to have two amazing part-time jobs, one with the Schizophrenia Society as a lived experience presenter of information on mental illness and its treatment. My other job is the one I am even more proud of. It shows that I have come a long way in my treatment. I currently work as a creative writing teacher in the same psychiatric hospital I was sent to 31 years ago. I do everything I can to show my students how life goes on after psychosis and depression and I like to think I am making a difference.