

My 49-Year Recovery From Mental Illness

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Although I was a very insecure girl and young woman, I always managed to function until March of 1970—when I suffered a postpartum breakdown. It occurred about a year after my son, Matthew, was born. Before my breakdown, my pent up feelings made my brain feel like a worn-out machine—struggling to do its job. At my illness's onset, I was hallucinating, thinking that the TV was sending me messages. I remember the fear I felt because our family was living way out in the countryside in such isolation. I felt devastated when I could not function well enough to take care of my baby.

It took 30 years before my illness was diagnosed correctly and treated successfully. Finally, I got the right medications. With enough therapy, I also had enough personal growth to bring my symptoms under control. I've been blessed for almost 2 decades with improving health.

There is no cure for brain disorders yet. I still have little manic blips about twice a year, when I lose sleep. But my brain no longer operates like a worn-out machine. As I try to rest, my mind feels more like a gently flowing stream—carrying peaceful and creative thoughts. My many years of improving health make me grateful that I never gave up on accepting treatment or on reaching out to other people—despite the rejections caused by my illness.

After Matt was born, a friend had helped me get a part-time job, as an assistant teacher at the University of Iowa's experimental pre-school. But I was depressed, I did not have clothes suitable for work, and I could not focus well enough to handle the job. I had to resign.

I had never had to resign from a job before and it was humiliating. My husband had been accepted into the University of Iowa's graduate Writers' Workshop and had a teaching assistant position. But because we needed my income to supplement his pay, we had to live in poverty for a long time. I felt humiliated when I had to apply for food stamps for our family.

Over the years, my husband had become more and more rigid and impatient. I'd been feeling increasingly miserable as a result. I'd hoped that the birth of our child

would benefit our marriage. As I've noted earlier, before the breakdown, my pent up feelings caused my brain to feel like a worn-out machine—shooting angry sparks in all directions. I was desperate. But instead of asking me, "Are you upset about something?" or "Can I help you?" my husband punished me by avoiding me. I know that my husband loved his son. But our marriage continued to have little communication and not even any warmth.

Looking back, I realize that throughout my life; I've had a very poor ability to imagine and prepare for the future. I'd been accepted into the Masters in Teaching English program at the University of Iowa. During the spring before Matt was born, I was completing a report on Charles Dickens rather than reading about what to expect during childbirth.

Although I felt joyful and healthy throughout my pregnancy, during and after the birthing; I felt terror, humiliation, shame, and guilt. Never in my life had I felt such pain! When Matthew was finally delivered and a nurse let me hold him, I remember, saying, "He's just what we've wanted."

When my breakdown occurred in 1970, the TV news was airing reports about mentally ill people who committed suicide or massacred others. Although I was not suicidal or violent, I knew that the stigma of my illness would be turned against me. I became totally paralyzed.

During my early childhood, I don't think anyone, who knew me, foresaw mental illness in my future. My parents complemented each other in seeing to it that I received attentive care. It was not until my high school years that my dad's problem drinking began to undermine my self-confidence.

It was a shock to me—when I broke down. The first medicine which was prescribed for me (Thorazine) drugged me so badly that I felt unable to wake up or stay awake. Throughout a 30-year period, my doctors tried at least 25 different medications on me—all of which were more or less ineffective. Symptoms of my illness came and went. I was often anxious or agitated. At times, my concentration was very poor. Racing thoughts and obsessive

feelings of guilt or worry sometimes propelled me up a manic rise. The medicines available for sleep made me feel so drugged that it seemed dangerous to drive. The side effects of medications were not always known before I took them. For example, in one instance, my doctor told me that he'd learned that a medicine, which he'd prescribed for me, could cause aggressive behavior. If things were going O.K., I was reluctant to change medicines because I was afraid of losing my ability to take care of Matt. Some medications, which I took, gave me a degree of stability and their side effects became familiar to me.

I've been lucky to need only brief periods of mental health hospitalization. I was hospitalized for 1 week after our family moved. After my divorce, I was hospitalized for 2.5 weeks. Both times, I was blessed to be in the care of very good doctors. After I came to Florida, I no longer had my ex-husband's health coverage. I was hospitalized for 1 week on 3 occasions in a facility in Ft. Lauderdale—following periods of acute sleep deprivation.

In 1977, my husband had allowed his mother to fly over from France and move in with us—with only 24 hours' notice. She did not have an emergency. She just decided to return to the United States. My mother-in-law tried to take over the house and was verbally abusive to me. I felt violated. She often said, "I always wished I had a daughter," but I learned that what she wanted was someone whose every action she could dictate and whose privacy she could invade. I always felt humiliated if I let her goad me into an outburst. Her arrival spoiling an opportunity which I had, to teach a couple of introductory English classes. As a result, I was to get stuck in a low paid, boring job (with no benefits) at a local sporting goods store—because our family needed the income.

My husband and I had tried marriage counseling for years. Always our therapists said, "Open up direct communications. Ask open-ended questions." My husband would seem concerned about our well being when we were in the counselors' presence. But, he never followed

up on their suggestions. When we got home, he'd shoot an angry look my way and bolt into his office. Eventually, I seemed to forget the words, which I needed, to express and to defend myself.

The timing of our divorce and my poor legal representation were problems for me too. My son Matt was diagnosed with Epilepsy when he was about 12, and his disorder was not yet controlled. After my husband took Matt and moved out, not being able to check on him every day drove me up a wall.

I was 44 years old at that time (1986). I depended on my husband's health coverage. Hoping to find a professional job with benefits, I completed work a master's degree in Library Science. I had done well in graduate school. I had some success finding library work, but I was never able to find a library job with health benefits. The symptoms of my illness and the side effects of my medications had an impact on my work performance, and I believe that the drug tests that were required for many positions opened me up to stigma from supervisors.

After the divorce, my parents very often got stuck with huge additional costs for my upkeep. Initially, they were angry about it—they did not understand the nature of mental illness. I'm very grateful that my parents were willing and able to help me over the long haul. Eventually, with guidance from NAMI, my mother educated herself about brain disorders. She helped me apply for Social Security Disability and find a good mental health clinic. My SSDI has allowed me to retire so that I have time to enjoy friendships and pursue my interests. For almost 2 decades, I've been blessed with improving health.

I feel very grateful to have survived 49 years of living with mental illness—when so many people with brain disorders have not. Because of my many years of improving health, I'm glad that I never gave up on accepting treatment. All of us can only pray that funding for brain research and training professionals, who are so desperately needed, will be given the highest priority.