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**New Hope Peer Specialist Training**

**Recovery Paper**

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Mental illness became visible in my life gradually over the years. In 1989 I had my first and only panic attack in Chicago, Illinois when attending a convention. In 1994 there was a manic episode that occurred with a job change, however I did not know it. In April of 2007 another manic episode occurred when preparing to run a marathon, again I had no clue this is what I was experiencing. In 2007-2008 a multitude of things happened, including the following: my wife obtained her doctorate degree; my daughter received her social work degree; I ran my first marathon; we celebrated our 25th wedding anniversary and my 50th birthday; went on a cruise to the Panama Canal; left FedEx-my employer of 13 years to work for a small marketing firm; watched my life savings in the stock market go down by 30-40%; went into my first severe depression, hospitalized for suicidal ideations; and was diagnosed with having bipolar type II within 90 days of the depression. This resulted in my termination from my new job. I attempted suicide with an overdose of pills one year later and re-hospitalized. These two years were a whirl wind for me, my life as I knew it came crashing down. I was no longer employed, life became very different.

The depression and the two psychotic break downs were very devastating and disabling. Despite a 99% compliance in taking my medications, it still took two plus years to get them to work. Given the severity of the depression, I didn’t question that I had a mental illness, but rather looked for solutions. These solutions came from the support provided by my wife Ann and children Kate and Mark, my family (especially my parents and sister Cathy) and friends who were there for me. I volunteered at Restore stocking shelves, at BEAMING a therapeutic horseback program for individuals with special needs, and joined the board of Fox Valley Warming Shelter for the homeless. I enrolled in classes at Fox Valley Technical College to improve my writing and computer skills that I believed to be major deficits. By taking classes this became a respite care for me, as I couldn’t safely stay at home, drive a car, or stop dozing off. Ann and I joined Lake Park Fitness and started working with a personal trainer and participated in many group exercise classes. The trainer’s psychotherapy was more effective than my psychologist. My neighbor invited me to join the New Horizons Band, to play clarinet and go out for sodas after practice. My recovery was greatly enhanced by involvement in these areas.

The actual acceptance of having a mental illness came within a couple of months. The strong support from family and friends and the engagement in the community made living with mental illness easier. The hardest part is getting thought the stigma my family and society has towards mental illness. My family’s deep hidden –unspoken culture kept mental illness a secret. Examples include: an uncle who completed suicide by jumping from the roof of a hotel in Green Bay, anther uncle who was put in a mental health hospital for life, a grandfather who completed suicide by hanging himself, and two first cousins with Bipolar Disorder. The stigma that society has of mental illness has taken the family stigma to a higher level. Someone with mental illness is feared as someone who might commit a crime, potentially murder, because if their illness. Society believes they are to be contained, maintained, and medicated for their safety and the safety of society.

My ability to overcoming this stigma was made possible through education, acceptance of my illness, and a strong recovery. Within the first year of my mental illness I went to a NAMI support group and took a Peer to Peer course, read articles and some books. Education helps take stigma out of mental illness. Acceptance means acknowledging that one has a mental illness, that one’s capacities many not be the same but that one can still live a meaningful and productive life.

My key strengths for each of the 7 categories are as follows:

* **Daily Living**: I am completely self sufficient in this area except driving for long distances. I have a beautiful home located in a nice neighborhood and a cottage on a lake that are paid for and furnished. All of the grocery shopping and a number of meals and most of the household chores are done by me.
* **Financial:** I am satisfied with current and future income levels are sufficient to cover all expenses including dinning out and travel. The only debt we have is a student loan which was acquired when Ann was enrolled in her doctorate program, and our two children were going to private colleges. I pay all bills.
* **Education:** I have a BA in Economics and a minor in Psychology have taken numerous courses in sales and computers. I attended the Wisconsin NAMI conference, last spring. The CPS program and attending the upcoming state conference has provided me with new skills to use in assisting others in accomplishing their goals for recovery. Resources are available to me, to seek and obtain any additional education that may be needed for my certification.
* **Social Support:** I have a very supportive wife, children, parents, and a great neighbor Bob who are there to listen and support me. My wife Ann is an Occupational Therapist who is very observant of my behavior and mood changes, and helps me keep on track and aware of my triggers and behaviors.
* **Health:** I have an excellent psychiatrist, personal trainer, membership at a gym, and good medical insurance. I don’t smoke or drink in excess. Exercise, yoga and healthy eating are a priority
* **Recreation:** I enjoy going to the health club, going out to dinner, to plays, movies and traveling. The needed finances to do these activities in moderation are there.
* **Spirituality:** Our family culture is very committed the values, beliefs, and sacraments professed by the Catholic Church. This belief in God and his power to health has helped me in my recovery.

The major goal that I will accomplish by December 31 2015 is to significantly reduce the possibility of diabetes by loosing fifteen pounds or weighing175 pounds. The resources to have a membership at a fitness center, work with a personal trainer, purchase and prepare healthy foods, and partake in nutrition courses exists. The funds for the club and personal trainer are paid for this next year. My wife Ann has similar goals. We need to make a commitment to exercising 4 times a week, and replace the sweets and junk food with healthy choices in moderate portions. We also need to record a daily food and exercise log and determine the underlying reasons for making poor food choices. Together with determination and prayer this goal will be accomplished. An additional objective is to give back to the community by making a commitment of 20 hours a week on non profit board and working as a Certified Pier Specialist.

The major five year financial goal is to pay off the student loans and grow retirement funds realizing a 7% annual growth rate. The most important goal is to maintain one’s physical, mental, and spiritual health. I am interested in living a balanced live. This includes continuing the short term physical and mental health (ones recover) goals, time for spiritual-daily prayer of one half hour a day, recreational-monthly mini vacations to visit family and friends and one major vacation a year, and educational-read 3 books a year and taking clarinet lessons.

For better or worse having Bipolar has had a profound impact on the lives of my family, those I interact with, and on me. Life before Bipolar was one of intense work in corporate America and attainment of goals. My genetic predisposition for mental illness coupled with stress, caused the “bear” of depression to “rear” its ugly head and the ladder of what was perceived as success, to be pulled out from under me. I have a new label, Bipolar, one who may be the target of stigma as being “broken”. I am not broken only modified .I am not Bipolar, but I do have it. New opportunities have presented themselves to me like working with children with disabilities, being on the board of the Fox Valley Warming Shelter for the homeless and now workings with others with mental illness that are in a different stage of recovery. Are all these people broken? I would say NO! I now have a new perspective about life. I realize the importance of health, God, family and friends. I realize that relationships are valuable and that materialism and stuff is not. As I ponder and reflect, I realize how important balance is in life and what meaning is all about through a new perspective in life.