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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. Although I did not realize it at the time, in 1994 I experienced a manic episode that occurred with a job change. In April of 2007 another manic episode occurred when I was preparing to run a marathon. Again I had no clue that I was experiencing mania. 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; we went on a cruise to the Panama Canal; I left FedEx (which had been my employer of 13 years) to work for a small marketing firm; I watched my life savings in the stock market go down by 30-40%; I went into my first severe depression, and was hospitalized for suicidal ideations; and I was diagnosed with having Bipolar type II within 90 days of the depression. This resulted in me being terminated from my new job. I attempted suicide with an overdose of pills one year later and was re-hospitalized. Those two years were a whirlwind for me. My life as I knew it came crashing down. I was no longer employed. Life became very different.

The depression and two psychotic breakdowns were very devastating and disabling. Despite a 99% compliance in taking my medications, it still took more than two years for them to work. Given the severity of the depression, I didn’t question whether I had a mental illness. Instead, I looked for solutions. These solutions came from the support provided by my wife (Ann), 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 which has a therapeutic horseback program for individuals with special needs, and I joined the board of the Fox Valley Warming Shelter for the homeless. I enrolled in classes at Fox Valley Technical College to improve my writing and computer skills (which I believed to be major deficits). Taking classes became a respite for me, as I couldn’t safely stay at home, drive a car, or stop from dozing off. Ann and I joined Lake Park Fitness, started working with a personal trainer, and participated in many group exercise classes. The trainer’s psychotherapy was surprisingly more effective than that of 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 all of these areas.

The actual acceptance of having a mental illness came within a couple of months. The strong support I received from family and friends and my engagement in the community made living with mental illness easier. The hardest part is getting past the stigma my family and society places on people with a mental illness. My family’s deeply hidden and unspoken culture was to keep 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 places on those with a mental illness has taken the family stigma to a higher level. Someone with mental illness is feared as someone who might commit a crime, and could potentially commit murder, because if their illness. Society believes they are to be contained, maintained, and medicated for their safety and the safety of society as a whole.

My ability to overcome 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. I also read some articles and 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 seven categories of my Strengths Assessment are as follows:

* **Daily Living**: I am completely self sufficient in this area, with the exception of long distance driving. I have a beautiful home which is located in a nice neighborhood and a cottage on a lake that are paid for and furnished. For our home, I perform all of the grocery shopping, prepare a number of our meals, and do most of the household chores.
* **Financial:** I am satisfied that our current and future income levels are likely to remain sufficient to cover all expenses, including dining 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 of our bills.
* **Education:** I have a BA in Economics and a minor in Psychology. I have taken numerous courses in sales and computers. I attended the Wisconsin NAMI conference last spring. This CPS training course has provided me with new skills to use in assisting others to accomplish their own goals for recovery. I anticipate learning even more relevant skills by attending the upcoming Wisconsin MHSA conference next week. 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. She helps keep me 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 for me.
* **Recreation:** I enjoy going to the health club and out to dinner, watching plays and movies, and traveling. The financial resources necessary to engage in these activities (in moderation) are available to me.
* **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 heal 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 losing fifteen pounds, getting my weight down to 175 pounds. The resources to afford a membership at a fitness center, to work with a personal trainer, to purchase and prepare healthy foods, and to 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 four times per week, and to replace the sweets and junk food with healthy choices in moderate proportions. We also need to record a daily food and exercise log and to determine the underlying reasons why we have made 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 per week serving on the board of non-profit organizations and working as a Certified Peer Specialist.

The major five year financial goal is to pay off the student loans and grow retirement funds to be realizing a 7% annual growth rate. The most important goal is to maintain my own physical, mental, and spiritual health. I am interested in living a balanced life. This includes continuing the short term physical and mental health (my recovery) goals, taking time for my spirituality (a minimum of one half hour of daily prayer), recreation (taking monthly mini vacations to visit family and friends and one major vacation each year), and education (reading three books per 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. Due to this label, I may be the target of stigma as though I am somehow “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 who have disabilities, serving on the board of the Fox Valley Warming Shelter for the homeless, and now working with others living with mental illness who are in a different stage of recovery. Are all of these people broken? I would say “NO!” I now have a new perspective on life. I realize the importance of health, God, family, and friends. I realize that relationships are valuable and that materialism and possessions are not. As I ponder and reflect, I realize how important balance is in life and what meaning is all about through my new perspective on life.