

They Said I Would Never Get Better

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They said I would never get better. I would always be mentally ill. They said I would be in and out of mental hospitals the rest of my life. I could never be the person I was before my mental illness. I made up my mind in the mental hospital that I would prove them wrong. I would get better and help others know they could too.

The year was 1977, just two years after the Supreme Court ruled in favor of a patient institutionalized for 15 years who brought a suit for release and won. As a result, 250,000 mental patients were deinstitutionalized after years of hospitalization. At the time, I was living in Anchorage, Alaska. I had lived there since 1957, when I was twelve years old. Beginning in May 1974, my husband and I had gone through six major crises in an eight month period that led up to my getting mentally ill. Because of the enormous, chronic stress I was under, I broke not only mentally, but physically, socially and spiritually as well. Beginning in July 1976, I started hearing voices and had to quit work. I had no insight as to what was happening. Although I was on Thorazine, I was not getting any better. I continued to hear voices, experience hallucinations, and became delusional. I couldn't function any longer as a wife and mother. I was out of control and my life was falling apart. By January 1977, I went into the Alaska Psychiatric Hospital after becoming delusional and thinking I was the Virgin Mary.

The Alaska State Police were called to escort me to the mental hospital. Within twenty minutes of signing myself in, I was forced drugged against my will. This had a very negative effect on me. It set me up to resist treatment and medications after getting out of the hospital. It was just one more traumatic event added to the others that had led up to my institutionalization.

I wanted to get better right from the beginning. However, I didn't find any support from professionals. I was very frustrated. I asked if there were any groups of people who had been mentally ill and had gotten better. I wanted to meet with them. I was told there weren't any such groups because people with mental illness did not get better. I asked if I could have just one person's name that had been in my situation. I was told that confidentiality laws prevented the professionals from giving me any names. I felt as if I had both feet nailed to the floor. I felt alone. I felt hopeless. However, this didn't stop me. It made me more determined than ever to keep my resolve to get better. I was very frustrated. They told me I was denying my illness. I

wasn't denying it. I accepted my illness.

My whole life had collapsed around me and it seemed like there wasn't anything I could have done to prevent it. But living with mental illness the rest of my life was not something I wanted to do. I wanted to sleep all the time, making it difficult to function on a daily basis. The simplest tasks were no longer easy to perform. My frustration gave way to tears, self-pity, and resentment. I wanted answers and the mental health system didn't have any.

I was told my mental illness was caused by a chemical imbalance in my brain. I was told I had a brain disease. I asked how they knew this. Did they take any tests to determine this? I didn't remember my blood being tested for any such thing. I was never given any answer. I was put on Thorazine. Thorazine made me sleep too much and slowly my will was being destroyed. I felt flat and empty inside. Besides, I had the Thorazine shuffle when I walked; I drooled and my tongue stuck out from time to time. It was very embarrassing. I didn't know these were side effects to the medication. No one had told me this. I thought I was much more mentally ill than I was. I was overmedicated from 1976 to the end of 1980. I seemed to be a zombie on Thorazine.

After I got out of the mental hospital, I asked my psychiatrist what happened to me. His only comment was, "What the hell do you care?" He was very flippant about it. He said he would not tell me because it was not in my best interest to know. It took me three months to build up the courage to go back to the mental hospital and ask the social worker what had happened. He explained that I had an acute paranoid schizophrenic episode. He was very kind to me when we talked. He tried to answer my questions and help me understand. I found it very difficult to understand at this point. Mostly, I felt hurt and humiliated and I just wanted it all to go away.

December 1978, my husband decided to divorce me and left me with two young children. I wanted to work. My conscience told me I had to work. I had to face reality if I wanted to get well again. My therapist tried to convince me to go on welfare; to get food stamps; to get housing assistance; to get aid for families with dependent children. I told her that, in good conscience, I couldn't do that. I wanted to get better. She told me, "You can't make it without welfare. You will fail and you will lose your children." We argued about this on several visits, until finally I told her I couldn't see her any longer because she was trying to force me to go against my conscience. I knew what I had to do to get better. What I wanted was to find a doctor and therapist who would support my desire to be healthy again.

I changed doctors and therapists. I wanted to find someone that believed I could get better and who would help me know what I had to do to get better. I finally found a doctor that said, "I don't know" when I asked him if I could get better. For the first time, someone didn't tell me "no" or that "people with mental illness did not get better." He gave me hope. For the first time, I had a glimmer of hope! He told me follow up and records were not maintained on people who stopped seeing their doctors. He said there was no way of knowing whether people stopped seeing their doctors because they got better or because they were still sick and just stopped seeing them.

I was mentally ill for eight years. Through those eight years, I developed a burning desire to get well. My sister had given me a book called "Think and Grow Rich." She told me if I followed the principles in the book that I would get better. No one had told me that before and it stirred something very curious in me. I read that book and I could not put it down. The theme of the book was "whatever the mind can conceive and believe it could achieve." It really made me think. I could identify with the stories of people in the book. I not only began to think about the principles, but I began to act on them. Things began to happen for me. I continued to be mentally ill; I continued to break down; but there were long stretches in between the breaks and they didn't last as long as the ones before. I was beginning to get healthier as my thinking became healthier. Using the principles, I began to believe in myself. I accepted myself just the way I was. I wrote things down on paper about myself; things that I needed to change and things I couldn't change. I started thinking about the things I wanted to do with my life when I got better. The more I learned to think, the more I learned how to get better. I learned how to forgive the hurts of the past and to let them go. I learned to plan for the future, but to live just one day at a time. I learned that if I just changed one small thing about myself today, that I would be building a healthier tomorrow for myself and my children. There were many things I had to change about myself so that I could be free of mental illness. It was not an easy thing to do. It was a lot of hard work. There were many, many disappointments and setbacks. The most important thing was not to give up and to challenge my thinking to believe that because I am, then I can, and I will achieve mental health. I stopped blaming and I took responsibility.

I really needed the support of a lot of people, too, in order to make it. I surrounded myself with people who believed I could do it, even though they didn't know of anyone who had. They were possibility thinkers; just because something had not been done did not mean that it couldn't be done. Every time I would say, "But, I can't do that because I'm mentally ill," my sister would say, "Can't never could. And if you say you can't do something, then you could never do something. You have to at least try it." I went out and I found jobs and I worked. My employers and fellow employees knew I was mentally ill, but they supported me in my desire to work and they encouraged me to keep on trying. When I broke down, they were there for me. I felt humiliated and embarrassed after a breakdown, but they never reminded me of the embarrassing things I did. They only told me how happy they were that I survived and that I was getting stronger and better every day.

It took me eight years to learn all the things I needed to learn in order to regain my mental health. It wasn't just changing my eating habits, or taking vitamins that did it. It was a combination of many things that I had to learn to change me so that I could be healthy. It was being able to live in the community, to be able to work, to be accepted by myself and others, it was taking responsibility for myself, it was learning how my mental illness was hurting the people that loved me, it was a willingness to change myself to become all that I wanted to be. It was accepting the illness, but working toward health. I have now been free of mental illness, drug therapy, and psychotherapy for eight years. I want to share this with others: patients, families, professionals, communities, corporations, and religious organizations. Mental health can be a reality for even the most seriously ill people. People need the

hope that others have done it and how they did it.

As I stated when I was in the mental hospital, I made up my mind that I would get better and I would help others know they could too. Currently, I live in the Chicago area. I am developing a speaking business to promote mental health and to educate and train professionals, patients, families, communities, corporations, and religious organizations. My workshops give hope and encouragement to all.