Mental Illness: From Hospitalization to Hope

This is Lara Gurney’s story, NAMI’s VOICE, September 2016

I, Lara Gurney, NAMI Utah, was in my twenties, in school and learning things I truly enjoyed when I experienced my first full-blown panic attack.

I couldn’t breathe; my throat felt like it was swelling up. I was sure that I was dying. My fingers and toes started going numb. I felt like I was in a dark abyss and could not get out. I felt an overwhelming sense of doom. Something was very wrong. I was alone and very scared.

After that first episode, I continued with school and took my final exams, passing all of my classes; I had one exam left. The panic set in again, and I froze. I left school and never went back; I never graduated, and everything just stopped. I gradually became agoraphobic -avoiding certain places and situations and only occasionally leaving he house. I spent months this way. Then, my mom helped me voluntarily check in to a place for change, a place of renewal and hope, a place to get a diagnosis, proper medication and therapy.

I was in a mental hospital. But I was alive. For the first time in months, I had hope. I found people there, living their lives just like me. I wasn’t alone. The doctors gave me the initial diagnosis of generalized anxiety with phobias, with obsessive compulsive disorder soon to follow.

Since I was first hospitalized at such a young age, I had to learn quickly that my illness wasn’t just going to go away. That was the beginning of the rest of my life as someone with a mental illness and the beginning of my gradual transition into this new life. I came to understand that if I fought to stay alive, then maybe some good would come from all the pain and suffering that I’d experienced.

With this new understanding, navigating my ups and downs was changed. There was a point when I was in the hospital, having attempted suicide, but I realize now that my attempt was really a cry for help. I didn’t truly want to die. I wanted a release from my situation. I have learned how to change my thought process when I go into a panic attack, and gradually, it is working for me.

I want to survive - not just exist - and live life to the fullest.

NAMI has helped my family over the past few decades by teaching them to understand what to do to help me and what to do to help themselves. As a result of my NAMI training, I have taught many new hires at the state mental hospital what living with mental illness is like and have taught at a community college and local youth detention center.

Advocating for mental has saved my emotional life. It’s such a relief to find others that need help and to be able to provide help. I have found resources and a safe outlet to share my experiences through teaching. I hope that sharing my story provides hope for the future, a better day when mental illness is better understood and stigma is in the past.

Through all the grief, sorrows and joys that this illness has brought into my life, I have a purpose, and I’m not finished yet.

There is HOPE.

To read more about Lara’s journey, visit *www.nami.org/personal-stories/you-and-me.*