Mental Illness: Finding Purpose in Recovery

Personal Story by Rachel Herzog, NAMI Helpline Volunteer

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Rachel’s story: “I am a junior at California State University, Fullerton studying Business Administration. This semester I’m studying in Washington, D.C., which has given me the opportunity to volunteer for the NAMI Helpline.

“In October 2014, the fall of my sophomore year, I had my first manic episode. I felt like I was on top of the world, but I also experienced terrifying paranoia and delusions. Unable to function properly, I had to take a medical withdrawal from school, which deepened my depression.

“For months, I was lost. I was losing weight, crying often, pacing uncontrollably, and couldn’t sleep. Going to different doctors and finding the right medication took a lot of time, but I was fortunate enough to be surrounded by people who loved me and wanted me to get better. Through a combination of medical help and prayer, I found my way to where I am today – comfortable with my bipolar disorder and able to use my lived experience to help others through their own tough times.

“During my journey to recovery, I learned about NAMI. I was trying to learn more about mental illness and was searching for organizations that offered support. Since then, NAMI was always in the back of my mind as an organization I wanted to be a part of, so when I was searching for internship opportunities in the Washington, D.C. area, I saw NAMI as a perfect match.

“Answering calls on the HelpLine is a way I can help others while using my own experiences. People call NAMI for help finding resources, and I’m on the other end of the line, helping them through every step. As someone with lived experience, I understand how important it is to hear from someone who knows what a person is going through.

“I remember one call in particular – it started out like a regular call, but ended up having a profound impact on me. The caller’s name was David, and he had been recently diagnosed with bipolar disorder. He told me about his experiences, including his dark thoughts and erratic behavior. He mentioned that no one around him understands what he is going through, that he felt alone in the world.

“At that point, I was able to share with him my own experiences with bipolar disorder and that I ,too, have felt the loneliness he described – that my family was scared when I tried to tell them about the thoughts I was having. I explained to David that through treatment and perseverance, I am now in recovery and live life with a healthy mind despite my disorder, and that it’s entirely possible for this to be his future as well.

“After I was done sharing my story, David said seven words I’ll never forget: ‘You may have just saved my life.’

“Volunteering with the NAMI HelpLine helps me feel like what I went through matters. I’ve found that connecting with others can heal a lot of pain, and volunteering has been a significant tool for my own recovery. Sometimes the conversations are difficult, but it’s great to help people find both resources and encouragement. Even through the worst parts of my illness, I’ve discovered a purpose and a cause to support for the rest of my life.”

There is always HOPE!