

# Life Stories

## Lifelong Learning for survival



I am a 31 year-old Alberta Mental Health system survivor and I would like to share my lifelong quest for learning about myself and others, and how I fit into the bigger picture. This struggle has been arduous for me and others like me because of the general lack of understanding and acceptance of mental health issues in our society. People learn through social interaction and the way I see it, the only way over this hurdle is through communication and educating each other. I would like to begin this process by sharing some of my feelings and experiences.

Needless to say, I have a mental illness that has resulted in a life filled with misunderstanding and complex social paradoxes. Those paradoxes have led me to develop a rather unique understanding of society. There is some part of me that exists outside of society's fabricated bubble, the part of me that always seems to look in from the outside. Outside the bubble I sense that society is glued together by overly complicated guidelines and formed by influential predecessors.

The other part of me exists within society; I realize that I do have some effect and vice-versa. Consequently, I strive to conform to the pressures to some degree. Unfortunately, I seem to be good at inadvertently breaking society's rules. This tendency does not indicate that I am simply 'out of touch with reality,' rather it is the result of 'nature versus nurture', as influenced by my mental illness.

My earlier life included many years of misdiagnoses and confusion, and falling short of those standards set by society. My perceived reality was continually ripped apart and re-constructed. It took extensive counseling to help me to help myself. I focused on determining which of my character traits were 'abnormal'. As a result, my more recent past was devoted to in depth research around the events of my life and examining how those events shaped my own evolution as a person.

Even after developing a more congruent ideology, I was shocked by those who had impacted my life the most; they were convinced of their own ideology without any continuous investigation. For example, I found most of the ladies I dated simply criticized me for my insecurities and other weaknesses. Surely I had some redeeming qualities worth mentioning? Did they ever question their own integrity as a partner? This lack of reasoning may be well reflected by a comment, familiar to me,

"Well, it didn't work out because he's sick in the head".

In an ironic twist, I am described to other people as 'damaged goods'; yet, when I tell people they are normal, they are insulted and indignant, asking, "Am I just normal, just average?" From where I sit, there appears to be a vain-filled pride reflected by our society. Many people, who are well accepted by society, act as if they are entitled to hold proper judgment and reasonable authority over their less accepted counterparts.

In my experience, when people learn I have a mental illness, they act as if it is appropriate to investigate my more personal life. On the contrary, I feel it is reasonable to ask people to understand and acknowledge that, whatever pathology I suffer from, the results are very personal and private moments of pain and humiliation.

Some may argue that inquisitive individuals are simply trying to help. Well-meaning people, however, should understand that given the multitude of doctors that I have seen over the years, I have opened my closet and exposed my skeletons, time and time again.

People might see me as being somewhat over critical towards society. My life experiences, however, have given me no choice but to seek out the answers to those questions that are not asked. For example, how am I to deal with my own personal challenges with mental illness, as well as facing challenges common to all people? Why have others ignored my own needs at any given moment? Do they not understand? Is it me who is at fault or is it society?

I know that society will never fully appreciate my perspective. I feel, however, that some education from those who know may help people to better understand me and others with similar issues. In order to get a sense of how profoundly mental illness can affect a person, please consider these times and events in my life.

My mental health issues have led me to five suicide attempts. At those times I was convinced that it was immoral for me to exist because I felt I was detrimental to the proper function of society.

Issues that contributed to my lowly sense of well being included my being ostracized throughout my school years. What was the problem? Did I inadvertently bear witness to some obscure reality that people are inherently evil at heart? Perhaps I was simply too dull to 'get it'. If most people 'got it' then it could not be that difficult to understand, could it?

Why have women in general not viewed me as a worthy partner? Surely I have a few strengths and some degree of honourable character?

Finally, who reserves the right to label me as being weird, strange, or worse? Is everything that 'normal' people do, really normal?

At times I simply cannot reason with a mind that acts unreasonably. Thankfully, through my counseling sessions, I have been able to seek a more consistent theory of reasoning.

For my added benefit, I have learned to deal with some very common issues that apply to many 'normal' people. A good example revolves around how I balance my parenting with my career.

I find that reflecting upon my own past, coupled with counseling, results in higher self-esteem and a more satisfactory quality of life. My new self confidence and understanding encourage me to look a

long way up from the bottom rung of society's ladder of success. My sights are set higher.

I simply cannot accept the idea that my mental illness puts me at a complete loss. There has to be some greater advantages that come with the hand I am dealt. I have been working hard at researching my own strengths and weaknesses. I have utilized all I learned from courses I took through Alberta Mental Health, and from the results of my numerous psychological tests.

To my surprise, psychometric intelligence testing reveals my strengths to be in the areas of language and comprehension, rather than the arts that I have been pursuing. A course that I took, aptly named Excel, has also helped me to understand that my mental illness has shaped my personality into the rather socially aloof INTJ (the "master mind" of the Myers-Briggs personality scheme). I have determined that I am a strategist, planning my best strategies through building systems of thought.

It is my personal belief that the greatest power I can ever achieve is to know myself; knowledge is power. This belief has been reinforced through events that occurred in a very low point in my life.

About seven years ago my young daughter,

**... no choice but to seek out the answers to those questions that are not asked ...**

Raven, left with her mother to live with another man. Sadly, the next year Raven's mother lost custody of our daughter to Child Social Services. I knew I had to get my daughter back despite a most disheartening report that revealed my mental illness to a psychologist, hired by Child Social Services.

Fortunately, I had attended a Life Skills course through Alberta Mental Health. Considering that I had added to my overall skill set, I decidedly put those to skills to work during my supervised visits with my daughter - only one good example of my exemplary strategic planning ability.

There were three 'life skills', in particular, that proved to be highly effective in my case. The first was to 'consider criticism as information only'. Each time I was criticized for my parenting, I would take advantage of that information. During each visit, I would ask the social worker if I had done anything wrong and, if so, could she explain to me what I had done wrong? If I had in any way failed to meet Child Social Services' criteria, I would change accordingly during my next visit. This was a demonstration of continuous and committed improvement on my part.

The second life skill was to 'address the needs of others before my own needs'. The key here was to address the needs of my daughter, as seen through the eyes of the social workers involved. I worked very hard to demonstrate that I could meet Raven's needs, to the satisfaction of Child Social Services. Together, we were all able to come to the

understanding that protecting Raven from a life of inconsistent parenting through foster homes was our shared and preferred goal.

The third life skill used to aid in gaining custody was to 'reconsider my perspective'. My newly evolved perspective helped me to view the social workers as essential assistants, and ensured that my actions spoke louder than the words on that psychological report.

Three years later I was finally granted custody of Raven. Admittedly, I felt proud that I had raised the bar for the mentally ill, a bar that society continually lowers for whatever reason. Raising the bar, permanently, was a part of my motivation.

The life skills that I employed may seem simplistic. I look around, however, and observe that many 'normal' people are either lacking in these skills or simply do not use them.

I find that different skills can be especially powerful when used in certain circumstances. Ultimately, part of my strategic planning process is to recognize and become very familiar with the skills I have. Once the regular inventory is complete, I am able to decide upon the existing skills I should further develop, or upon new skills that I should acquire. My world is opening up with new experiences ranging from dancing on television to personally working with world record holders.

Despite a later diagnosis of an 'unusually elevated sense of self worth', life continues to be quite challenging. I have developed my own best practices to help me cope with added burdens.

Keeping a sense of humour tops my list. I try to find the humour involved in serious issues. This practice is not an attempt on my part to dismiss the seriousness of a situation rather it comes from the realization that life can also be a comedy.

I listen to a lot of inspirational music, the most inspirational music I can find. Music helps me to cope at times when my emotions are elevated, with even greater tension. Within my own mind, the music speaks of my own destiny and how I can overcome even the most over-bearing adversity. Music positively influences my mind and thus my inner motivations.

Another goal is to continuously develop new and more congruent perspectives - the ultimate key is to think outside of the box. I have created my own Personal Records Book and documented 182 personal records. Every time I break a personal best, I redefine my own ability and potential.

It is important for me to continuously reorganize and re-strategize. Life is like a fierce game of chess; as long as I am breathing, I have pawns on the board. If plan 'A' does not work, I move on to plan 'B' or 'C'.

Ultimately, I believe that my survival involves me 'redefining myself to an art'. Redefinition of self helps me to recognize and to firmly grip those values and concepts that are most meaningful in my life. For me, this is my mission statement, a promise I made to my good friend Donald, who passed away, and to my daughter and her future.

Keep learning about yourself and others, for life. In the words of Sir Winston Churchill, "Never ever, ever, ever, ever give up".

- Darryl Learie