1.2

A JOURNEY THROUGH MENTAL ILLNESS: AMBER'S STORY

Personal stories are crucial for understanding mental illness. They allow us to connect with the lived reality of mental illness and to appreciate the strength, resilience and perseverance of individuals seeking help for mental health challenges. They cultivate our empathy and compassion and encourage us to reach out with understanding and support.

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In the following personal stories
(lessons 1.2/1.3), you will:

- Note the relationship between adverse childhood experiences and the development of mental illness

- Gain empathy for individuals living with mental illness

- Identify effective measures for supporting the treatment, stability, and a full life for individuals dealing with mental illness.

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The Starting Point

At the age of 15, I began to feel out of place and really lonely. I experienced a lot of negative thinking and didn't really understand my worth or who I was. I didn't understand the feelings but I knew that it seemed kind of dark and lonely and even confusing. I didn't reach out for help. I thought maybe I needed more friends or more social activity.

The Downward Spiral of Confusion, Isolation and Hopelessness

I wasn't really sure what was going on but I began to start thinking about the death process because I felt so alone. I knew I was depressed; I knew I was lonely; I was even cranky at times or moody so I felt like I was just a bother. My mom actually walked in on me holding a knife. At that time, I was not planning to hurt myself but I was in "the feels" of it- trying to understand, "Is this what I do? Is this it? Is this how you do this depression thing?"

The Pain of a Broken Relationship

That's when my mom decided, "Okay, we need to do something." She didn't really share her thoughts. Our relationship was not the typical mother-daughter relationship and that probably played a part in some of my mental health issues. She did get me some help, but I don't know if it was done in the greatest way; I don't think she understood. She literally drove me to the St. Cloud Hospital and left me there. Here I thought I was having a fun day with my mom - there was no mention of what we were doing that day except for hanging out. Then I was driven to St. Cloud Hospital and that's where I stayed for a week. So many things came across my mind in that moment, like "okay, even my mom doesn't want me" that actually fueled my depression and anxiety and how I felt about myself. My mom was not educated in what to do for me.

The Power of Compassion

I was first put in a locked unit for observation and it seemed okay. I was confused and didn't know what was really going on. Then I got put into another area where there was more freedom and we could walk around. We had groups and I learned that art is an outlet for myself. They had crafts and a great nurse that let us bake cookies. There were just a couple of us teens in there and she made it more comfortable by saying, "Hey, you don't have to be scared to be here. It's going to be okay." Having the comfort of someone showing compassion was really helpful because otherwise you're going to these classes and being taught information that I didn't really understand at that age. It went pretty well for me there but it did not necessarily stop my mental health issues that carried through and grew.

I had a difficult upbringing and going back to the same environment didn't help my mental health. My mom was a very emotionally closed-off person. There wasn't the support I needed or the compassion like I got from the nurse or the hospital staff. I didn't have a mom that asked questions or said, "How are you doing today?" or "I love you." She was physically there and physically provided for us, which was wonderful, but emotionally I didn't have the support I needed at home.

The Search for Answers

I began to go look for the attention and support I needed which led me down way more paths than I wanted to be down. This included drugs and alcohol, which only deepened my mental health issues. I didn't go and get help from an institution because of my first experience in a hospital.

There was a lady named Sandra Carson who took me in after I moved out of my parents' home at the age of 15. I was in the thick of my mental health issues - not understanding and feeling stuck. She really invested in my life. She helped me with my schoolwork and became like a mother to me when my own mother was fairly absent. It planted something in me that said, "People do care about you", and that has stuck with me for many, many years. She's one of my heroes yet today.

Eventually, it got bad again and I started to self-mutilate or self-harm. At that point, I knew that I needed help somehow so I began going in and out of therapy. My whole young adult life was spent

trying to answer, "What is wrong with Amber?"

The Healing Process

I still go to weekly therapy. Right now, thankfully I'm managing without medication, but there are times when I do need that support. I work with a doctor and I have been re-evaluated over the years and found that I have more mental health diagnoses than I did when I was 15 as a result of trauma, my drug use, and the non-support of my family. I've educated myself and learned why I feel the way I feel; why my negative thinking is so strong some days that I can't look past it. I learned that I have borderline personality disorder explained as: I feel really hard, I take on a lot of emotion, and I assume that others are thinking poorly of me. Borderline personality disorder has developed because of life experience. Once I understood that it wasn't something I did or something that's wrong with me, I realized that I could grow and learn and be educated and know what I need to have in place.

The most important thing I need to have in place is support; strong support. My friend, Sarah, really helps me now. There are still days that are really tough and I can always call her. I've called her at five in the morning and I've called her at midnight. I've messaged her to say, "Today's a really emotional day," and she'll say, "Do you want to talk about it?" Sometimes I do and sometimes I don't - but she's always willing to be there with me. I can say whatever I need to say and

she's not going to judge me. That's what I need - someone who will listen and someone who cares. She doesn't push advice on me but she has asked if I wanted her advice. Then she puts the decision back into my hands and says, "What are you going to do?"

I've done a lot of different types of treatments or therapies including talk, EMDR, and DBT. My most effective would be a toss-up between DBT and EMDR. DBT gives you the skills that you need to make it through those hard things every day. EMDR helps you get past some of that past trauma that you've been kind of stuck in and living through. It brings you back to the past and helps you heal from that time to this time. I wish I knew the science behind it because it's amazing. I know it has to do with creating pathways in your brain. It really helped relieve the load that I've been carrying for many, many years thinking I

had to hang on to my past experiences.

I also have a small group in my life right now and I would suggest that for anyone having mental health issues. I can tell them anything. If I'm crying and having a negative, really bad day, I can call them and say, "Hey, this is what I'm thinking. This is how I'm feeling. And they'll say, "Are those things true? Who told those to you? Who's telling you that?" They bring me back to the truth of who I am and what is reality. Being understood and knowing your worth is very important. Supportive friends can play this role by getting involved in peer groups; remembering they're not there to fix a person but to really listen and ask questions.

I need this; I will always need those supports in my life. It is something constant - the connections; the relationships that we all need.