
MY PATH TO RECOVERY

When my alarm goes off on a typical weekday, I reluctantly roll out of bed and jump into the shower. I hurry through breakfast and race off to school. After class, I grab some coffee or a sandwich and then hurry to work. I return phone calls and emails and juggle through the tasks at hand. I stress over prioritizing my responsibilities and figuring out how I will get it all done. When the day is done, I return home to face my homework, put in some time on the treadmill, and eventually collapse into bed.

Sometimes things are pretty overwhelming. I convince myself that there is no way to manage everything that's going on and that I simply can't handle it. But then I stop and think. I think of what I've gone through and what I've achieved. I laugh at myself for stressing so much over work and school. I think of how thankful I am to be working and pursuing my education. And I think about the days when I was simply fighting for my life.

A mere three years ago I lived in a completely different world. I was depressed, anxious, obsessive-compulsive, and mildly psychotic. My emotions were so torturously intense at times that it took all my strength just to live in my own skin. I had no goals and no plans for the future. I wasn't entirely convinced there would even be a future. Self-injury became my primary coping mechanism—as well as my identity.

For several years I was intensely involved with the mental health system. I was hospitalized once per

month on average, both in local and state hospitals. I was once described by a psychiatrist as “the number one utilizer of crisis services in the county.” With a diagnosis of Borderline



“An arm full of memories” The scars on Melanie Green's arm remind her not only of what she's been through, but of what she's overcome as well. Photo by Kaarin Peters.

Personality Disorder, I was often misjudged by professionals with a lack of understanding of my disorder and of self-injury. I was accused of “just doing it for attention,” and told that I was “taking up time and resources that could be used to treat real patients.” It was difficult and confusing to be repeatedly put down

when I needed help the most.

Fortunately, there were people who did understand what I was going through. After meeting with several therapists for various amounts of time, I met one at a local mental health center that I truly connected with. She was trained and experienced in the area of Borderline Personality Disorder and was able to look past my illness and truly appreciate who I was as a person. I slowly gained support and learned new ways to cope with things that were difficult. After long periods of being “drugged-up” on medications like Thorazine, I began to work with an excellent nurse practitioner. Together we found a medication regimen that helped manage my symptoms and, at the same time, permitted me to function. However, even though I was receiving excellent care and support, I continued to struggle. Life was still tumultuous, and I didn't think I could tame it.

It wasn't until an early morning in the emergency room that things started to change. I was in a seclusion room waiting for a psychiatric consultation, having been transferred from a medical bed after overdosing the night before. My stomach ached with regret and I started to cry. “I don't want to do this anymore,” I thought. I didn't want to continue living from one cut to the next. I didn't want to spend half my life in hospitals and emergency rooms. I didn't want to *be* my illness anymore.

It took years for my mental illness to develop to such substantial

proportions, and it would take a significant amount of time for me to regain control of my life. But I was finally ready. I was determined to make it happen. Appointments with my therapist changed from being a way to kill some time to being a way to learn new skills. We talked a lot about why I felt the way I did and about the difference between how things sometimes feel emotionally and how they are in reality. I began to understand my emotions, and I gained the power to regulate them rather than be controlled by them. I was fortunate to be working with a therapist who understood and supported me. For every bad feeling I had about myself, she could point out something good. She helped me understand that my life wasn't over. All the skills and attributes I had before my bout with mental illness were still there, there was just other stuff in the way.

I was fortunate to have a mentor as well. By chance, I met a woman who had gone through many of the things I was experiencing. Although her story was different from mine, she recognized enough of what I was going through to convince her to make a commitment to me. She told me she would be there for me and that we'd "get through this together." We spent a lot of time together—sometimes just hanging out, sometimes in serious crisis. The point is, she was there. She still is.

My family also played a significant role in my recovery. My mother relentlessly researched everything connected with my mental illness. Her wealth of acquired knowledge included the details of each diagnosis I received and every medication I took. The rest of my family did everything they could to stand by me and to encourage me to grow strong again. I never understood the value of family until I saw what they all went through for me.

Things didn't get better immediately. It took a lot of time and a lot of hard work. Sometimes I fell back into old patterns. Sometimes

I'd give up—but just for a day or two. Every time things got intense, I was able to poke my head out of the chaos just long enough to get a look at the big picture. I started thinking about what I wanted to do with my life and began working on accomplishing it. I started slowly, adding one thing at a time. I went back to school and took one class per quarter. I gradually increased my schedule to two classes, then three. I began volunteering at Consumer Voices Are Born, a local consumer-run agency that provides a drop-in center and "warm line" to adults dealing with mental illness.

As my responsibilities increased, so did my confidence. I began to develop an identity. Rather than a mental illness with a little person inside, I was becoming a person with a little mental illness inside. My efforts were initially slight but quickly gained momentum. Once things started rolling, they never stopped.

In the spring of 2003, I was given the opportunity to help conduct some focus groups in preparation for a new mental health grant that had been awarded to Clark County, Washington. I was flattered by the offer and eager to participate. It never occurred to me that the offer would mark the start of a new beginning. The focus group project led to an invitation to join the steering committee for Clark County's Partnerships for Youth Transition. Later that year I was asked to travel to Washington, D.C. with the program for a cross-site meeting. Within a few months of the trip, I was offered a job as the Youth Coordinator for the program.

Now, with a little over a year of employment with Clark County, I have to take a moment from time to time to reflect on what I've accomplished. Sometimes I still feel like I'm stuck in my old world and that I'll never get out. I remember the way things used to be and wish that I could just erase it all from my life. These are the times when I give

myself a pat on the back. I think about the youth I work with and the fact that I'm on the other side now. I think about the people I sit in meetings with—people from the same agencies that used to provide me with services. I think about the numerous presentations I've given at national conferences and the people who come up to me afterwards with compliments and to ask for more information. They're asking *me*—professionals in the mental health field are coming up and asking me for advice. It's amazing. I've been able to take the worst part of my life and turn it into something positive for other people.

I think about the things people tell me and the compliments I receive. They're the same kinds of compliments I received when I was younger, when I knew I was worth something. I went for so long without feeling any value. It is amazing to listen to people and to truly believe that I mean something again. People value me and the contributions I make. I've come back to life.

Recovery is a remarkable thing. For me it has meant gaining my life back. For others it may look different. But it is a possibility for everyone. There is no person alive who can't have things at least just a little bit better—and to me, that's recovery. Recovery is a process. It doesn't necessarily mean that everything will be better and problems will cease to exist. It may mean being able to cook dinner, manage medication, or simply control emotions. It's still important though. Individuals brought down by the weight of mental illness need to be reminded that there is more to their life. They deserve the opportunity to discover who they really are.

Melanie Green is a college student as well as the Youth Coordinator for the Options program in Clark County, Washington, which assists local youth with mental health issues make a successful transition from adolescence to adulthood.