

## Hope

I gave a presentation at a conference where I used my story to challenge the audience's inner beliefs about mental health. I gave two scenarios. In the first, I described the life of a child who had experienced a great deal of trauma and abuse. The second scenario was about an adult, who despite suffering from mental health issues had found her way through an often oppressive mental health system, had recovered and was living a fulfilling life. No one was able to guess that both scenarios were me. Why? Through stigma and discrimination, a picture developed in the people's minds that led them to believe that there could be no positive outcome for that young child. When I revealed that both scenarios were me, someone in the audience blurted out "oh, my!" I won't forget the impact that had on me, not only as a presenter, but as a person with lived experience. I realized that society as a whole doesn't really hold much hope for recovery for persons with mental health issues and that when one does recover, it is considered a miracle!

If all of our stories are full of tragedy and describe lives with no meaning or purpose, we are continuing to bring about the stigma and discrimination that already exists. Worse, we are doing it to ourselves. It takes courage, resiliency and a whole lot of work to get to know one's inner self, but it's worth it. My experience presenting at the conference drove me to want to do more to promote education, recovery and hope. I wished to create change in a community where people with mental health issues have both hope and support to experience wellness.

Hope is the catalyst to recovery. Hope perpetuates forward movement and takes one out of a place of complacency to one of drive and passion to create positive change. I remember I once told my therapist that I was broken and couldn't be fixed, much like a porcelain doll that had been broken into pieces and would never be the same. In time, though, I came to understand that I had become a unique multifaceted piece of art, where hope and possibility had created a beautiful mosaic unlike any other in its resiliency and beauty.

During my 35 years in the mental health system, I have come to know the heart of suffering, but I have also experienced the inspiration and support that were necessary on my road to recovery. Without inspiration, through hope, I would be in a very different place today.

For me, my story wasn't about the trauma and abuse that I experienced. It was about the learning, hope for others and the fact that I was fortunate enough to still be here to share my experiences with others in a similar place. I am careful not to come from a victim stance, i.e. emphasizing the negative and gory details. Rather, my story drives the idea of the possibility of recovery and positive change. I talk about courage, resiliency and strength rather than complacency and helplessness. By doing so I think that those hearing my story will understand and believe it is possible to recover.

Telling our stories can bring great change for those with lived experience giving them the gift of hope. It is time to walk out from the shadows and shine as brightly as we can.

*This article was written by Deb Deforest, Team Leader with Self Help Alliance.*

*The "Open Mind" column is sponsored by individuals and organizations concerned with mental health issues in rural Wellington and Dufferin counties. Contact Canadian Mental Health Association at 519-766-4450 ext. 231 or [sparkinson@cmhawwd.ca](mailto:sparkinson@cmhawwd.ca). For access to all Open Mind columns and local mental health resources/information, visit [www.cmhagrb.on.ca](http://www.cmhagrb.on.ca) or [www.communitytorchlight.com](http://www.communitytorchlight.com)*