

Reflections

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Looking back there are steps in my recovery from mental illness that I was totally unaware of as I was going through them. Recently, I've been thinking about the positive steps in my recovery.

It began when I finally accepted my mental illness and became consistent with my medication. I realized that this was how life was going to be. I would have this illness for the rest of my life. It would be up to me to have a voice in how my future would develop.

After I left the hospital for the second time, I went into a homeless respite for a period of time. After being confined to a hospital I enjoyed this newfound freedom and the prospects of another step in a forward direction. I was a 3 pack a day smoker, and then I was able to smoke whenever I wanted. I also had an hour each day when I could walk or be picked up by a family member to go to a nearby lunch counter where I enjoyed their homemade German chocolate cake. I began to feel slightly normal again. I could have been anyone eating at that café. No one knew me, and no one could make a judgment about me. Gradually, I moved to a rooming house where I had my own room and my own TV that I could watch whenever I pleased.

I took a major step when my Veterans benefits came through and I finally moved into my own apartment. Words could not explain how happy I was. I finally felt independent again. I was beginning to manage my mental illness. I was responsible again for my own space in the world.

Over time, I realized that my 3 pack a day cigarette habit was having a negative effect on my life and my health. I was missing out on some parts of life because I had to go on a smoke break about every 15 min. With the help of God and Nicorette lozenges, I was able to quit.

I had been drinking alcohol since high school. When I wanted to plan an outing, it involved alcohol. Yes, I was an alcoholic. Drinking was more important to me than eating. I finally decided to quit drinking for a number of

reasons: the calories involved were making me unhealthy; I was spending a lot of money; and more importantly, the alcohol was affecting my medication. I enrolled in a Substance Abuse class at my Veteran's hospital where I learned about being good when no one is watching.

Stopping smoking and drinking were some of the most important changes that I have made in my life since my initial mental health diagnosis. There have been other changes that may seem smaller, but have been helpful to my positive state of mind. I started exercising and trying to eat healthier. I am also taking responsibility for my health by taking advantage of other benefits at my V-A, such as dental care.

For the first time in my life, I can say I am truly satisfied. This would not be so without the steps that help me to change my life.

Today with the help of my veteran's benefits and social security, I live in a very nice apartment. There is a grocery store across the street, and a Costco a block away. I have an outdoor porch where I can enjoy sitting in the sunshine and a fitness center where I can work out. I don't take any of these amenities for granted because I know that my life would spiral downward without my medication and my support system at the veteran's hospital and also my family.

What is the point of this reflection on the changes in my life? It's because I want everyone to know that things can get better. My experiences have made me more religious now but I will not preach, however, I do feel a sense of pride in what I have been able to accomplish. I have found my voice as a writer, and my desire is to bring hope to anyone who might be facing mental illness.

My advice for anyone is keep moving forward, avoid negativity, and don't ever give up. Remember that exercise helps, set goals. Find a release whether it is physical, mental, or emotional. Everyone will have bad days, but make sure you stand up to them, and don't be afraid to ask for help.