Your Employee and Family Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Mental illness: The road to recovery



The journey from illness to wellness is different for everyone. We connected with Lisa B who graciously has shared her own personal experience in the hope that this makes a difference in someone else's life.

I've always been a "worrier", and worrying about everything actually served me well for many years – or so I thought. Even as a child I fretted about my grades and rarely came home with less than an A. My focus on detail also helped me excel at sports. I became a serious young woman with high expectations for myself. I thought that all the worrying paid off when I received an academic scholarship to a prestigious university and graduated with high honours. My perfectionism, focus on every detail and every "what if" then helped me excel at a job I loved. In my mid-20s, I got married and soon after began a family and life kicked into high gear – as did my worrying. I worried about the stress my husband experienced at work, I worried about our personal finances, I worried about our increasingly hectic schedules and of course I worried about every aspect of my children's lives. That's what working mothers do isn't it? Worry?

My life was stressful but ordinary until one day: I was about 35 years old and was out grocery shopping after a particularly tough few weeks. One of my children was having trouble in school and was acting out, my mother had been hospitalized, my husband had decided to start his own business, and I was under a great deal of pressure at work. I remember I was in the cereal aisle when suddenly my heart started pounding, I became short of breath, I began trembling and sweating, my chest hurt and I thought I would pass out. I stood there for a few minutes before somehow making it out of the store to my car where I sat for 15 minutes wondering if I was about to die. The symptoms slowly subsided and I went home, shaken but seemingly okay. Later the same month, it happened again – this time at work – and again two months later during an argument with my husband – I think the episode alarmed him more than me.

I now had something else to worry about. It seemed I couldn't switch off my mind. My thoughts raced night and day, I couldn't sleep, I had chronic indigestion and I began obsessing about real and imagined problems. I felt physically sick, exhausted, and mentally drained. The frightening attacks continued – I never knew when or where they would happen – making me fearful of leaving my house. My ability to

function at work and at home declined. However, I still thought I simply had too much on my plate and things would soon return to normal.

The tipping point came three years later when the company I was working for underwent a massive restructuring, and I lost my job. This was devastating, especially given the mental and physical state I was living in. But it also gave me time to reflect on the last few years of my working life. It became clear to me that my excessive worrying had affected both my job performance and business relationships. I had become fearful, irritable, and unfocussed. I worried so much about imagined problems that I couldn't seem to get anything done and my "attacks" often left me trembling and tearful. I felt utterly alone. I had no job, no social life, my children spent more time with their friends' parents, and my husband was working long hours and running out of patience with me – I had dismissed his plea to get help for years. It was then that I suddenly realized that I had lost much more than a job: I had lost friends, alienated family members, and endangered my relationships with everyone around me. I had to admit that my husband was right – I needed help. It was actually my husband who suggested that I likely had an anxiety disorder. He'd gone online and saw that my symptoms fitted those of both generalized anxiety disorder and panic disorder. He'd even contacted his Employee Assistance Program for more information and mental health resources in our area. So I somewhat reluctantly reached out to my family physician for help. He prescribed medication and I started feeling more in control of my thoughts – and the panic attacks subsided – within a few weeks. For the first time in years I felt like I could breathe.

I wanted to know why most people handled stresses and anxieties while mine overtook my life. So I sought out psychotherapy to better understand my illness and counselling to learn strategies to deal with stress. For me, physical activity and relaxation techniques worked wonders. I rediscovered my childhood passion for sports. I ran every morning, joined a tennis club, softball league and played golf with my husband. I even persuaded him to take up yoga with me! Through sports, I started making new friends who not only accepted me – anxiety disorder and all – but supported and encouraged me.

Words can't describe how my decision to get help changed my life. I enjoy my new job – and I'm good at it. I have caring friends and most importantly, I've reconnected with my husband and children. I've learned my lesson. While I need to focus on my family, my job and my social circle, I also need to focus on myself. I finally realize that I'm not perfect and that makes me happy.

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