

A Workaholic Survives

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For most of my 30+ year career I have been a workaholic. I enjoyed my work and was very good at it. But for the last few years I have been working less, and have been much less interested in working. It is like I am trying to swim through "Jell-O" just to get up in the morning and sit at my desk. I think it started with my depression, and now the anxiety pretty well limits my output and interest.

I experience - uh, make that "survive" Generalized Anxiety and Social Anxiety with a little Depression mixed in for good measure. I try not to use the term "suffer" and I try to avoid thinking of myself as a "victim." I try to think of it as just one of life's challenges to overcome. Everyone has challenges. God gives us challenges; mostly I think to strengthen us, but sometimes for a specific reason. Those reasons are known to God and sometimes we later learn what they are, sometimes we don't. And, sometimes we give ourselves challenges.

Looking back, I have always had GAD and SA - their fingerprints are all over my life. I remember many experiences as a kid that now are clearly the result of them. I just didn't know it at the time. I remember occasions where an innocent event triggered anxiety so strong I would essentially crumble up and cry. As I got older I cried less, but would get into a state of anxiety such that I could not eat or sleep for a day or more. There are things that would have been different had I known what it was, or if I had better control over my emotions. It has definitely altered my life.

Fast forward to... I think it was the Fall of 1997 when I was having trouble staying awake, nearly falling asleep whenever I drove more than 20 minutes at a time. But I could not sleep at night. Also had what turned out to be IBS. Went to a doctor, fully expecting to have serious GI problems, or who knows what. They had a medical student interning at the office who saw me first. After a few questions he started a spiel about how there are new drugs available now that I should consider trying - drugs that could help people with depression... OK, I admit, this is where I stopped listening and started thinking gee, this guy needs to go back to school, I am dying here, and he thinks I am depressed?

About this time the "real" doctor comes in, and follows about the same line of questioning. He says something about a few tests he wants me to take to be sure, but that there were new drugs available now that I should consider trying... (What? didn't the "junior" doctor just give me this speech?) He sent me home with a couple sample packs of Prozac and an appointment to have some tests run.

When I got home and Mrs. remo asked what the doctor said. I didn't know what to say, so I just handed her the Prozac samples.

During a follow-up visit to the doctor I responded to a question, saying something to the effect of "and my anxiety level has gone way down (since starting the Prozac.)" Even though the words came out of my own mouth, it took me by surprise. That was kind of a moment of epiphany for me. I immediately started doing Internet searches and studying other materials and learned that there was a link between depression and anxiety disorders.

After a year on Prozac, I stopped. Partly because of side effects, but more because of the stigma of taking anti-depressants. Mrs. remo was not exactly happy that I was taking them either. She tried to be supportive, but really did not understand. I've never been a great communicator and generally just clam-up when something bothers me. Besides, I had been told that "you don't need anti-depressants if you just study your scriptures."

I did OK as far as the depression goes, without the Prozac. I could deal with the occasional bouts of depression now that

I understood what was happening. But the anxiety just kept increasing. Almost imperceptibly it kept slowly increasing until I was having serious problems trying to work. I was making errors and poor judgments. Then in the Fall of 2003, the Fox Television Network filed a lawsuit against me over a project I was working on. I started waking up shaking in middle of the night and doing dry heaves every morning. I couldn't eat. I lost about 20 pounds in a couple of weeks time. I could not hide it anymore! (Why do we try to hide it? I am guessing I was in serious denial, but that is a topic for another day...) I could not even drive, and business trips were out of the question. I had Public Hearings to attend in another state and a lawsuit to fight.

Once Mrs. remo pried out of me what was going on, she drove me back to the doctor's office and dragged me in by the ear. This time around she is being much more supportive - probably because she could see the physical effect it was having on me.

We are still trying to work out the meds, but for now I am back on Prozac. (Also tried Lexapro and Paxil CR for a while.) I am doing much better now (Spring 2004) than I was last Summer and Fall, but I am still a long way from "well." I still occasionally wake up with the shakes and have my old friend anxiety hanging around to some degree all day long, every day. Oh, the lawsuit? The judge dismissed it and ordered Fox to pay our expenses.

I think the turning point was last Fall, when I decided something had to change and admitted I needed help. I opened up and talked to Mrs. remo and then went to the doctor. Well... OK, it was Mrs. remo who forced me to open-up and talk. But as a result I was able to admit that I needed help and decided to change. I did more research on the Internet and selected a few Anxiety BBS's to "hang out" on. I noticed that there were people who were trying to overcome their affliction, and there were others who seem to hang onto the idea that they "suffered" and were "victims." I made the conscious decision, that I would not be a victim, and that I was going to fight this thing and eventually win.

Not long ago, I noticed some guy named Sunbaked on one of the BBS's, and check out his new web site, with all of something like 3 - 4 registered users at the time. I was intrigued but had seen other BBS's start up and flounder. I read everything on his site and then challenged him as to why we needed another anxiety related BBS. I asked him what would make his site better than any other? I think he is on to something with his "survival attitude" and so I decided to stay a while.

(Update: October 17, 2007)

Wow. It has been close to 4 years since Sunbaked started PanicSurvivor and 10 years since my first diagnosis of clinical depression. A lot has happened since then. Some were significant life experiences, but nothing that everyone else doesn't go through.

No, I have not been cured. I am still taking Prozac. Anxiety is still a constant companion (GAD) and I still have minor bouts of depression. But I have learned to better manage both depression and anxiety.

I am surviving, and surviving very well thank you. No it is not easy, but it is manageable and I am doing better as I go along. Here are some keys that I have learned along the way. Maybe they can be of help to you.

1 - Acknowledge that you have a problem and need help. Talk to your spouse, a parent, a close friend, someone you trust and let them know what you are experiencing. Talk to them about it.

2 - Get help. Be it medial, psychological, spiritual, a combination of these or whatever works for you. See a professional and GET HELP.

3 - Stop thinking about yourself. You are not the only person in the world. Everybody has their own "demons." Everybody. Even the people who you may look up to, or view as a "hero." If you compare yourself to others you will always find someone better off than you and someone in greater need than you are. Do volunteer work, do something for someone else. If you focus on your own problems, they feed on themselves and you get caught up in a spiral dive of self-fulfilling prophecy. Find something to be thankful for. Focus on someone else, or something else and you will forget your own problems.

4 - Do not let your employment consume you. I doubt anyone at the end of their life has said: "Gee, I wish I had spent more time at work." I still have workaholic tendencies. But knowing and accepting that, I set limits, take breaks, and turn the phone off at night. Mrs. remo and I go on weekly dates. My next challenge is to figure out how to take a vacation.

5 - Life is short, and goes by faster the older we get. Choose carefully how you spend your time. As Mr. Miagee says in the movie Karate Kid: "Remember, balance."