

Ceejays Survivor Story

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Looking back from here - I can see a real path to health.

Even though I didn't always have a name for it, anxiety has always been a part of my personality. I was the sensitive one or I was always being too thin-skinned. I grew up in a large, noisy family and while there was a lot of love there was also a lot of violence. At least it was violence to me. See, since I've grown up and spent years in trying to make sense of my life I realize that people (even people in the same family) have vastly different perspectives on things. I thought I was just normal but it wasn't until years later, after a lot of pain and suffering, that I realized I was just normal for me!! And then other people had totally different reactions and opinions of how the world works. I am sensitive. And intuitive. I understand people and I can make a quick read of situations and often sort them out before most people realize things are off track. It's like I have a set of finely tuned antennae! Well, as a child this led to a pretty anxious life. I was always aware of what was going to get my siblings in trouble, when my dad or mom was angry and how neighborhood rivalries were heating up. To everyone around me it was just life. To me it was like there was a war looming all the time. And it was up to me to prevent it. So I spent a lifetime of taking on responsibilities that weren't mine. Piling things on my plate, setting goals and tasks that had to be met to avert disaster. And not just disaster for me - but disaster for others, too. I got into the habit of living like this. My body and mind were set on ever-alert. And I adjusted to this as normal. I grew up, had regular ups and downs in life, and graduated from college and got a job. Then I got married and had three kids in three years. And with the birth of my third daughter (when I was 30) my two teenaged step-children came to live with us full time. It was like someone turned the volume up on my anxiety to a LOUD, THROBBING maximum!! All of a sudden I was responsible for five kids, a house to run, a husband, animals, and all the rest of my family as well (parents, sibs, etc). I had to deal with an exwife, alcohol, high school, driving and loud rock music as well as babies learning how to walk, potty training and all the intricacies of toddler's lives. Oh and did I mention that when I was pregnant with my third child my husband was diagnosed with cancer? Yep, and we spent 3 months at a hospital 2 1/2 hours from home with me driving back and forth every other day. Luckily he recovered. But one day while driving the three little ones home from some outing I had a full-blown panic attack. Totally "out of the blue." I thought I was dying of a heart attack! I pulled the car over and as scared as I had ever been in my life. After about 10 minutes it passed. I had no idea what it was. I had never heard of Panic or Anxiety as a disorder just as something that happened to people in certain situations. This was NOT a stressful situation so something MUST be wrong with me. Terribly, terribly wrong. I had a Panic Attack about every day for a month and finally went to the doctor. He gave me a battery of tests and said I was fine. Healthy. I went home, not quite believing him. Then I decided I must have diabetes. Went for a whole work up on that. Nope, no diabetes. Brain tumor that must be it. Went back and got an MRI. No, no brain tumor. Then one night at dinner I semi-choked on a piece of bread. It scared the crap out of me. I began to obsess that I could not swallow without choking and this led to the most bizarre time period. I only ate in public places, and often at the hospital cafeteria because I was so SURE I was going to choke and I wanted people trained in the Heimlich maneuver to be nearby! Crazy!!!! I thought it was very smart on my part! Finally, finally my doctor sat me down and explained Panic and Anxiety Disorders. We talked about all the feelings I was having the hypersensitive mind, the racing thoughts, the irregular heartbeats, the obsession with health, the pain in my chest and head. He explained that Panic and Anxiety Disorders are unique to the person, that they manifest in different ways but that there is nothing physically wrong with me that I am truly healthy and okay. He prescribed Xanax for when it got out of hand, and suggested that I start therapy. I found a terrific therapist. Over the next 8 years I had two other therapists as well. Things change and I learned that changing therapists is NOT a failure, but a continued advocacy on behalf of my recovery! Each one helped me with a different hurdle. I learned how I had taught myself to be on alert, how I had a learned response to stimuli and how to change my thinking. I learned about meditation and yoga and breathing exercises. I learned about Carl Jung and his approach to dreams and to the psyche how each of us has our own path of individuation: becoming the individual we are meant to be. How suffering often starts us on the path. At this point my therapist really recommended I try an antidepressant. I resisted but eventually, because I trusted him, tried Effexor. Amazingly, it lifted the symptoms of depression and helped me find a sense of hope and possibility. I also began going to workshops on Jungian topics - and I had the chance to learn about creativity. I began painting and drawing. I read books. My world sort of opened up. I became a nature person taking walks, watching birds, growing flowers. I felt connected to the world. I felt a part of things. After 2 1/2 years we decided I should try to wean off the Effexor. I did it super slow and never had a single side effect. I was willing to stay on it if I needed to, but somehow we had put together a program of recovery that allowed me to stay free of Depression. I added massage therapy and acupuncture and found some great ways to support myself with compassion and care. I take care of my physical needs and recognize them as signals that I need to pay attention. For instance, my massage therapist helped me see that tensing up when I drive, and holding my hands the way I do contributes to the stiff and sore feeling I get in my left chest muscles! And all this time I thought it was my heart! It has been YEARS since I've had a full blown Panic Attack. Sure, I get some generalized Anxiety and I do have a healthy respect for my fears and obsessions. I know they are there! But I do not feed them. I do not focus on them. Instead I keep my eyes on the possibilities and on the abundance in the world. I know that I can live a full and rich and rewarding life. I am FILLED with blessings and grace! It has been a spiritual journey that started out because of crippling physical symptoms. Now I feel like my life is balanced and strong. I have learned about Panic and Anxiety. I understand its power and know that I don't seek to be cured as much as I continue to be healed of the symptoms. Being a member of Panic Survivors helps me stay in a flow of healing and positive thinking. Reaching out to others helps me to stay focused on the positive and healing path. I continue to learn how to take care of myself, while also staying connected to others. I am not alone. I do not need to isolate and worry. If I find those things creeping into my day, I log on and share with

someone.Â In my real life I pick up the phone and call someone.Â I go outside and take a walk.Â I draw.Â I paint.Â I sing.Â I dance.Â This is my one life.Â I am determined to live it to the fullest.