

## **My Steps to Wellness & Gainful Employment: One Woman's Recovery Journey**

Illinois IPS Podcast Series\*

Announcer: Thank you for visiting the Illinois Supported Employment Transformation Initiative web site. The following recording is part of our IPS Training & Education Online Library. Visit our web site to obtain free information and resources to promote employment in the behavioral health field.

Introduction: I am so grateful today that we have someone who has a lived experience of mental illness and recovery and they are here to share their story today.

IPS Participant: It's really good to be here today. I have worked in IPS, which stands for Individual Placement and Support, supported employment for those in mental health recovery in Chicagoland for over 9 years. One of the many reasons that I like my job so much is, that I believe that work is a very important piece of recovery for persons with mental illness. Maya Angelou is quoted saying, "Nothing will work unless you do." I would like to share with you a little bit about myself. Before working in IPS supported employment, I mostly worked in outside and inside sales, and product training positions. Except for a brief 6 month period, I have been working full time since college graduation. I believe that working was a very important piece of my recovery, and still is. I attended college and graduated with honors; I went to graduate school and received a master's degree in broadcast journalism. During graduate school, I did a documentary on homelessness. I spoke with homeless man who had mental illness. I was 24 then, I never dreamed that I would soon face a mental illness too.

I first started experiencing mental health symptoms when I was 30 years-old. I had been hospitalized five times for mental health reasons. The final time was in the summer of 2000. In July of 2015 I celebrated the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of being well, out of the hospital, and back to work. I can truly say that there is great treatment for people mental illness. As NAMI, The National Alliance on Mental Illness says, "Treatment works". My current psych has diagnosed me with schizo affective disorder, in remission. With a previous psychiatrist, I was diagnosed with schizophrenia. To treat my illness, I take an anti-psychotic medication, along with an additional medication to treat the side effects of the anti-psychotic medication. I also take an antidepressant. Outside of work I have been volunteering for NAMI as a speaker for over 12 years. As a speaker on the NAMI speakers' bureau, I help to educate different audiences that people with mental illness can recover and lead bright, productive, and meaningful lives. In addition I am very close to my family: my brothers and their wives, my parents, my cousin, and my husband. They have all been very supportive. When I have been sick, they have been there to get me help.

When I have been sick in the past I have had five major symptoms going on. Symptoms including paranoia: I was fearful that people were following me, and monitoring me. I believed that there were hidden cameras in TVs and mirrors, that the phone was tapped, and the room was bugged. If you remember the movie "The Firm," where someone is living in a home where someone feels like they are totally under surveillance, that's what it was like for me. I also experienced delusions. A delusion is a false, fixed belief, where I believed something to be very true, but it was really false, and a symptom of my illness. A delusion I got pulled into was in the area I grew up, there was a lot of conversation about the mafia. So when I got to thinking about who would be monitoring me, and victimizing me, guess what popped into my head? The mafia. In psychosis a loss of touch with reality, I'm sure you could appreciate if I thought I was being monitored and victimized by the mafia; that was a total loss of touch with reality, it was not true at all, but rather a symptom of my illness. I also have a little tendency towards depression and anxiety; that I have to keep an eye on. I remember the dark days, and in fact, I keep reminders of them. In now my memories of the dark days serve as a reminder that I have a mental illness, and I need to take a medication every day to correct the chemical imbalance that causes my thinking to be confused.

As I mentioned when I became sick, and before I agreed to accept medication. I had delusional thoughts about the mafia. Trust me I love my family, but one delusion when I was not taking medication was that I truly thought that my parents were in the mafia. I was at their house one evening, and I perceived them to be a threat to my safety and 4 year-old niece. I left their house and went into their neighbor's back yard and dialed 911. The police came and after questioning my parents, the police wanted to take me to the hospital. In fact, I thought the mafia had installed hidden cameras and bugs into my home and my car. And I thought they were monitoring me. In my delusional thinking, I thought I was working with undercover officers, and CIA and FBI to shut down the mafia. I came up with a plan to write some letters to some very important people, and to mail them to the White House. In the letter I explained that I was being victimized by the mafia, and I was asking for their help. After a few months of mailing about 4000 letters to the White House, in many cities throughout 12 states, I got a visit at my home from a secret service agent. He showed me his badge, I invited him in, and we sat at my dining room table. And he asked me, "Are you mailing letters to the white house?" Well, I proudly answered yes. My name and address were on all of the letters. I even put my phone number on all of the letters. And he then asked me, "Why are you doing this?" and I then asked him, "If I addressed stamped, and mailed a letter to the President Bill Clinton in a United States Post Office, and if someone broke into the Post Office and intercepted and read the letter what would the penalty be?" And he replied, "Five years in jail." And I replied, and tried to tell the secret service agent that I thought I was putting a lot of people in jail for five years, and he said "Just please stop mailing these letters." And I did not mail any more letters.

My paranoia caused me to consider taking my life when I thought that the mafia would torture me to a cruel death if they thought that I was working with the police to try to send them to jail. I also came close to being harmed after I confronted, and said some pretty harsh words to a man that I thought was in the mafia, following me in a shopping mall. After I finished telling this man off, he threw me into the glass window of a coffee shop. Luckily the glass window did not break, and my neck did not break. I realized that it's very dangerous for me to be sick, I can get hurt.

Now I am doing great. I have a great job. I'm very close with my family. I'm married 11 years ago to a wonderful man that I love very much. I shared with him while we were dating that I had mental illness. I am looking forward to a celebration in July when I will celebrate 15 years of being well, out of the hospital and back to work. I would like to cover three for the steps that have been critical in my recovery from mental illness.

First, I believe the foundation of hope for recovery begins with building an excellent support system. My support system consists of: my doctor, my therapist, and my family. I see my psychiatrist once a month, and I also see my therapist once a month. I have learned that it's important for me to be open and honest and share my thoughts with my doctors. I have learned that the second step to recovery is that the person with mental illness must understand that they have a mental illness and they must accept that they have mental illness. A big turning point is when someone can understand and accept that they have mental illness and get with the program. It took me 6 years of struggling before I came to understand that I had mental illness and get with the program.

So, as I mentioned, mental illness did not hit me until I was 30 years-old. And, as I mentioned, I really struggled for the first 6 years, I did not understand and accept that this was a condition that I would have to manage for the rest of my life. It was not until the summer of 2000 that I came to understand and accept that I need to take my medication every day and see my psychiatrist on a regular basis. And things really never got better on a permanent basis until I got with the program. I think that people with mental illness have to accept that they have mental illness and in my case I have to accept that I have to take medication for the rest of my life, and this is not something I am going to get well from, like the flu or a cold. And that taking medicine for the rest of my life is ok. A lot of people with physical illnesses need to take medication for the rest of their life. True, there are side effects but you can work with your doctor on

reducing side effects. I believe that you have to accept that, and that this will play an important part in your recovery.

So, what does acceptance mean to me? It means that I have to be responsible and make decisions on a daily basis to continue my wellness. Acceptance can mean giving up or doing things that one really may not want to do. For example, I made the decision to no longer drink alcohol, because psychiatrist explained to me that even though I was only having one or two glasses of red wine a week, that we would have to increase my medication to and pretty soon the alcohol would cause my medication to no longer work. When I think of decisions like whether or not I am going to drink alcohol or take my medicine, I have to think, “What’s more important? A glass of red wine, or my ability to pay my bills, keep my home, keep my marriage, keep my job, take care my family, and keep my happy little life?” The answer is clear to me. I have to take my medicine, and I cannot drink alcohol. I have to make take responsibility for myself, and make decisions to continue my wellness.

I think it’s not easy at first, but after I got out of the hospital and started getting stable, I had to get up and get out of the house, and reconnect back into society. It’s not easy. You have a bit of a shattered image. You have to rebuild you confidence. To really recover you have to reconnect. A person with mental illness has to connect back to their family, connect back to social outlets, and connect back to work. It is by understanding and acceptance that I have been able to stay well year after year.

I believe that the third step to recovery is to find employment. It’s important to be realistic regarding the level of in which you reenter back into the workforce. You may be able to start back where you were, but you may also have to work your way back up. What’s important is to get back to work. As a supportive employment specialist, I help people in mental health recovery find employment. I know from experience how important work is in one’s recovery. One of my psychiatrists explained to me once that work is very stabilizing for everybody. Work can provide structure, routine, social interaction, a chance to contribute to the community, a sense of accomplishment, self-confidence, self-esteem, a paycheck, and insurance. Let me break each one of these down, because they are all very important in a person’s recovery from mental illness.

Structure: when you are at work you have a plan for the entire a day. A reason to get up, shower, eat breakfast, and off you go to work. Once you are at work, you have a plan for the morning, then lunch, and a plan for the afternoon. Then home to dinner, and then off to bed, and then it all starts again the next day. This structure is wonderful for people with mental illness. They have a reason to get up, and get out of the house.

Routine: it’s important to have a routine, a schedule you can count on, and to know what the day will look like.

Social interaction: research shows that one of the side effects of unemployment in the general population is alienation and being isolated from others. One of the great benefits about work is that it integrates one into the community, and work takes us out of the house so that we can be around others.

An opportunity to contribute to the community: I agree with the poem by the author Rumi the poem says, “Everybody has been made for some particular work. And the desire for that work has been put in every heart.” I think that almost everyone, deep down really wants to contribute to the community.

A sense of accomplishment: to do the job well is meaningful. To feel good about being part of a team that is working towards a goal. To contribute and be a part of an organization is meaningful. Work can also help you build your self-confidence and self-esteem. When someone with mental illness gets well and thinks back to times when they were sick, they can have a shattered image sometimes along with shame

and embarrassment. To be able to have a place where they can build their self-confidence means a lot. And helps to rebuild a person's often shattered imagine and allows person to start feeling good about themselves again.

Work can provide a paycheck, and in some cases insurance. We all know how important it is to be able to pay bills and how good it feels to earn a paycheck for you work. I work fulltime, but part-time might be better for others.

It's important for a person with mental illness to get back to work. I believe it's also important to have a diversified workforce including persons with mental illness. According to NAMI National 1 in 4 adults experience a mental health in a given year. And 1 in 17 experience a serious mental illness such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, or major depression. It's important for employers to provide a place for individuals with mental illness place to reintegrate back into society, and back into the workforce. A little support and encouragement can go a long way in making a powerful and impact on a person's life. I believe that you can take a negative and turn it into a positive, so I have grown as a person in my journey with mental illness and I believe that I am a better and more knowledgeable person because of it.

I figure that everyone usually gets something. These bodies of ours are not perfect. Whether someone gets heart disease, diabetes, cancer, cerebral palsy, epilepsy, or even neuralgia, and some people even develop a brain disorder. Some people have a heart attack and others have a brain attack. The message is that mental illness can be treated with medication to correct the chemical imbalance in the brain and with the right support of a team so that we don't have to face it alone. So often in the media we only hear the negative side of mental illness. But thanks to organizations such as the IPS team for the state of Illinois, community mental health centers, NAMI, and dedicated people like you who are willing to support these organizations, people with mental illness can get the supports they need to live fulfilling and productive lives, and contribute to society. People with mental illness are people with great potential, who with the right treatment team, the right medication, and the understanding of their illness can have hope for a bright future.

As I have shared treatment works for people with mental illness. I would like to thank you for understanding that mental illness is just that, it's an illness and it can be treated. And individuals with mental illness, just like individuals with diabetes can get treatment and recover and live a bright and productive life, and contribute to the community, thank you.

Announcer: Thank you for listening. You can obtain additional recordings, or download a transcript, by visiting the Illinois Supported Employment Transformation web site.