

The Keys to My Recovery: Stable Supportive Housing and Meaningful Employment

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Depression is something I've not only experienced but witnessed all my life. It runs in my family. There's a lot of abuse in my history, and, looking back, I can see clearly how and why I gravitated towards substance abuse, as an attempt to self-medicate. For as long as I can recall, I have faced psychiatric issues – not only with myself, but with my family.

The Roots of My Depression

My grandparents couldn't speak English. They were from outside of Naples – Salerno – and came through Ellis Island. They were tough people and my parents were as well. Not my mother, particularly, but my father. He was raised in the streets of Hell's Kitchen: an old time New Yorker who would just as soon fight you as he would look at you.

I was born across the river in Hackensack, New Jersey. I grew up there and in Brooklyn. I just have one brother and sister, but many cousins, and because my parents were so social, I was raised in a very busy home. There was never any privacy.

The neighborhoods I grew up in were like small towns, and the world I was accustomed to was always segmented and clanish. Everyone meant well, but there was a lot of ignorance too – my family only ever spent time with other Italians. Instinctively, I couldn't understand the exclusivity of that, but I was also too young to question it more strongly.

My father was a lithographer; he worked in offset printing when that was still a specialized occupation. I don't doubt for a minute that he cared, that he loved us, but he was very tough. He expected a lot from you and used a lot of fear as leverage. Both negative and positive, I got a lot of attention from my parents. They'd make you a wreck, and half the time I didn't know what to think. They were overly strict, but equally my childhood was often tremendous fun, too. A real contradiction; I was ultimately spoiled and abused, that's the best way I could phrase it.

Nobody set out to specifically hurt me or anything like that. It's just the way things worked out. I loved him dearly but my father was a difficult and domineering presence. His name was Albert.

He never drank much at all, yet he had the very distinct behavior of an alcoholic or a drug user. The pattern was there even



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without the substance: the self-centeredness, always feeling sorry for himself, barely being able to hold a job because he had a temper problem (frankly, he was constantly beating people up – even, one time, at the age of 80).

Self-Medicating

There have been many times in my life when I could barely function. I was very unhappy for years – depression so bad I could barely get out of bed. I didn't want to do anything. It still comes back sometimes and I don't think you are ever really "cured." It's like everything takes forever. You have to force yourself to do everything, and you feel listless and old. It's terrible. You're alternately nervous and feeling almost drugged. It's a strange combination of things, and completely understandable when you're in the throes of something like that why someone would attempt to self-medicate.

It's very easy to be tempted, especially when you're younger. With alcohol or pills or whatever's available. You're just very unhappy. There's a vacancy, a core, that's much too easily colonized by substances.

My drug of choice was pills, but you start combining things with alcohol. Everybody does. Anything that I could get my hands on. It gave me more enthusiasm for things and made me feel more comfortable – instead of constantly feeling uncomfortable and never feeling like you fit in. In my experience, almost everyone in recovery says that. You want to know the

best definition of an alcoholic or an addict? Okay: an egomaniac with an inferiority complex. There are so many contradictions and paradoxes.

Employment and Recovery

Work was my salvation. It was the only thing in my life that seemed to go right back then. I went through a lot of money – wasted it – but I always managed to work. For several years, in fact, I worked in rehab, among a lot of psychiatrists and therapists. It was a good place to hide: you don't have a minute to wind your watch, and you don't have to focus on yourself at all.

Throughout most of the unhappy phases of my life, I was surrounded by people and almost always working. As the example of my time working in rehab shows, however, employment alone wasn't sufficient to safeguard my recovery. I had major depression and for too long it went untreated.

Nor was my housing situation stable yet. I was staying with friends, babysitting apartments, and sleeping on couches. I was also in the shelter system for a while and bounced around a lot of drop-in centers. With all due respect, I don't necessarily recommend that. (I know the city tries and I don't think we should take lightly what they offer: they put roofs over our heads and thank goodness shelters are available).

I tolerated being in shelters because I kept busy all the time – I know by now that I'm better off being occupied and having structure in my life. I went to therapy and meetings every day, and that's what saved my neck. For me personally, Alcoholics Anonymous worked a lot better than Narcotics Anonymous, even though pills were a bigger issue. I just found a greater comfort level with A.A. But regardless of the initials, it's really the 12-step program that made the difference. I went to the shelter simply to sleep.

Soon after, I was staying with a friend temporarily, a pilot. I was heading for an A.A. meeting, in the West Village, when 9/11 happened. My friend was flying at the time and they tucked him up in Canada.

We were walking around in a daze. Everybody was stunned. That's my major impression – a surreal, dreamlike quality. I'll never forget that in the subway station there were little kids playing with cap-guns, and people were just not in the mood to hear that. Everybody's nerves were stretched. We really needed each other and our meetings. With the whole city having to recover, *everybody* clung to each other. It brought a lot of people closer together.

Stable Housing

I moved into my home at Community Access just a few weeks later, in early 2002. I'm still very grateful because, let's face it, I was homeless. I checked in with two garbage bags, full of my possessions, and was still really shaky. Still pretty messed up, and pretty much in a fog. In recovery, I was barely a year sober and clean. Support from Community Access staff, together with the fact I continued attending daily A.A. meetings, is what kept me anchored. I learned that recovery takes time, and that you have to be patient with yourself and with others.

New York City may be crazy but it's also the most generous city if you're willing to work. When I first became a Community Access tenant, I had a service coordinator that was very forthright about making sure I got back to work, even though, at the time, I was on disability for major depression. Within six months I was working. It really brought a lot of my life back to me and, in fact, work turned out to be my primary expression, my salvation. Twelve years later, I'm still in the same job. I'm the assistant to the president of a small, family-owned jewelry company. I do a little bit of everything, but for the most part a lot of computer graphics for the company's website.

Depression is manageable. But it's tough, especially in the morning. Medication helps. It just takes the edge off, helps you deal with, as they say in the program, life on life's terms. I find that a tiny amount of caffeine helps too (since 2006, I've gotten by without smoking). I'm wary of overanalyzing my situation. Analysis is necessary, but in my experience I think it can sometimes be excessive.

What I do know for sure is that I've been sober 12 years and have more peace – at the age of 57 – than I ever had before in my life. For all but the first few months of those 12 years, I've enjoyed continuous stability at home and at work. That's certainly no coincidence.

Community Access assists people with psychiatric disabilities in making the transition from shelters and institutions to independent living – providing safe, affordable housing and support services, and advocating for the rights of people to live without fear or stigma. Find out more and get involved at www.communityaccess.org/facebook. And visit www.communityaccess.org/ca-voices to read other tenant stories.