My Path to Recovery

Rose, Brian T.¹

¹Lived Experience Editor, Journal of Recovery in Mental Health

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

KEYWORDS
Schizophrenia, Recovery, Substance-Related Disorders

Recovery is different for every person. For me personally, it took years to achieve a state of wellness. I worked really hard at my recovery and maintaining a balanced life. Where others might lack strength and resilience and need to develop these attributes during their recovery journey, I was taught them as a young boy growing up in the tobacco fields of Delhi, Ontario and Norfolk County.

Tobacco was our livelihood. The crop would be started in greenhouses from seeds and grown into a small plant that would then be transplanted in fields in late May. I started working on the farm at age 12, but basic work started at a much younger age. Tobacco was my first job, and my maternal grandparents gave me my start. Before I learned to drive a car, I learned to drive a tractor—it was a small Farm-all International with a manual transmission. My job was to take the harvested tobacco from the fields and deliver it to the kiln hangers, where the tobacco would be hung and dried. My grandmother would wake me up between 4:30-5:00 a.m. with a home-cooked breakfast that was usually eggs, bacon, and a hot coffee. We would work long, hard hours because there is a lot of work to do on 200 acres of land. We would usually work 12-16 hours a day. My grandfather in the 1960s was known to work 20-hour days in the summer to provide a living for his family and future grandchildren. Later in life, I would have to learn how to live a balanced life because working on the farm I never knew how to relax, which was a contributing factor to my decline in mental health. I eventually brought this work ethic to Alberta, where I was employed by an environmental oil company as an environmental engineer. Even in University when I lived in chaos, I had a strong work ethic.

While living with my grandparents, I had an uncle who was a loner; but he had great taste in music. I would borrow his cassette tapes of Led Zeppelin, Pink Floyd and the Rolling Stones. He would always have conversations with 'Charlie' late at night. My Uncle would sell fresh produce at the market, and if someone had a problem with his produce, he would blame 'Charlie'. What I quickly learned was that 'Charlie' was not real but a visual and audio hallucination. My Uncle had schizophrenia, an illness that...
runs in the male side of my family. My Uncle suffered alone. When I went to town with him, I would hear people openly put him down, call him crazy, nuts, and psycho. I saw him, though, as my Uncle - the nice man who taught me how to drive that tractor. I, too, later in life developed schizophrenia and would be called all those names. People have trouble understanding complex mental illness. I find with depression and anxiety people are starting to openly talk about it and understand it; but with schizophrenia, people would rather not deal with it.

I started my recovery on March 1\textsuperscript{st}, 2013, by giving up the drugs and alcohol that made me so sick. This was very difficult to do because, growing up in my house, even when we had no food in the fridge, we always had alcohol. I’m not sure if it was hereditary or if I learned this behaviour, but I, too, became an alcohol substance abuser. It happened slowly; but even while I was at McMaster University, I was known as a partier and drug user. I thought it was normal to partake in a risky lifestyle because I grew up in chaos. Although I saw my father drunk, violent, and physically sick from alcohol numerous times, I swore I would never turn into that. But I did. It happened when I moved from Ontario to Alberta. I started going to bars a lot and having alcohol in my house. I even dabbled in cocaine and marijuana. I learned later this greatly affect my mental health. Also, I was stressed from my job because of the intense hours we constantly had to work. A 12-16 hour day was a very demanding and lonely life. I remember when I worked in Swan Hills, just northwest of Edmonton, how paranoid I was. This town was known for its grizzly bears, and the marijuana made me think an attack was imminent. I never did see a bear, but my mind had started to get ill. I remember making a lot of money, but I was completely unhappy. I was suffering from depression but was too stubborn to seek out help.

Later in life, through therapies at a psychiatric hospital, I was taught new skills and a new way to live. But that drive in my heart to be the best never left me. I find it very difficult to take downtime and personal time, but I have built it into my new life. It is now part of my mental wellness. I play guitar, exercise, and even take time just to watch movies, which helps me balance my worklife. As a young man living in rural southwestern Ontario, mental health was never discussed. Even though my Uncle John lived with us and had schizophrenia, my family never spoke about it. Yet I would later develop schizophrenia and have similar hallucinations. My symptoms, however, started in my later 20s, and I handled this new stress by using poly-substances to cope. As I aged with the Illness, I guess I became wiser, and I started taking prescribed drugs that I was so against for the longest time. I finally accepted that I was living with an illness that I was initially embarrassed about, and I entered sobriety. I started openly sharing my journey to help others who are living with an illness that my uncle and I suffered in silence with for years. I am now 37 and have been living with schizophrenia for approximately 10 years. I have noticed my group of friends has changed from the partying type to the working class family type.

My life trajectory changed and I started planning for my future, which meant digging into my past and making major changes. I started with cutting ties with toxic people, which even meant family members in some cases. If I was to continue my life as a sober
person, I had to cut ties from the people with whom I used drugs and alcohol. I went on to social media platforms and cleaned up my accounts, which were full of foul language and boasts about drug use. I deleted all pictures and comments of me using drugs and alcohol. I started building a new family of people who were positive and who, in some ways, inspired me. I created a LinkedIn account in search of a professional career in the mental health field. One person who has stuck by my side is my mother. I let her know every day what she means to me. I eventually found a nice girlfriend who is understanding of mental illness and is also a great support.

To get well, it took a lot of work and effort: trialing new medication, failing and getting up again, and not quitting. It wasn't easy, but I knew recovery would take years. I had social workers counsellors, peer-support workers, psychologists, and psychiatrists that I worked with every day. It was a team effort to help get me better, to get back on track. Medication trials were hard because I gained weight, and had low blood pressure from some medications, so it took several medications to get me to a healthy place. People want quick fixes to issues, but that is not how a mental health diagnosis works; it takes time and effort.

In a hospital setting, it was difficult at times to navigate away from people using drugs. When I was in a medium secure unit, patients would save their prescribed medication from Wellbutrin to Ritalin and trade it for money and food. I even had an acquaintance pass away from an overdose of Dilaudid. Throughout this period, I kept refusing drugs and staying on my course to a new sober life. At one point, I had an acquaintance crush a Ritalin pill and offer it to me. It was during my first year of sobriety and it was so hard for me to say no, but I did say no and I pushed forward. When I was in the minimum secure forensic inpatient unit, many patients were using synthetic marijuana as a way to fool the system. Alcohol, cocaine, and steroids were also around. My mother raised me better than that, and I kept that in my mind. I also started to believe that I owed it to myself, and I also had a fear of becoming ill again.

I think help is available if you want it badly enough. For me, it took a major crisis to occur in order to change. I was tired of feeling the way I did, so I had to change. Through the ten years I have been in dealing with mental health concerns, I have noticed a change. There is more help now and more people are talking about mental health matters. I think that early help is the key to prevention of major mental deterioration. I think mental health is so tricky because it is unseen and very hard to diagnose. It is unlike a broken bone where you can measure the break and measure the progress when the bone is healing. When the mind breaks, it is hard to tell that it is broken. The time it takes to heal is a long process. The way I came to be healthy was my drive to never give up and to always have hope because even in the darkest room, The smallest of light can show you the way.

Acknowledgements
The author does not have any conflicts of interest to declare regarding the publication of this article or its content.