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Mental illness.

My diagnosis is OCD. In darker years I also struggle with suicidal intentions, depression, debilitating anxiety, and psychosocial disabilities.

My journey.

At the age of about 7 OCD kicked in and life became a game of hiding my true reality of counting rituals. I won't go into what that looks like as there is much literature on this condition. So from the age of 7 till 23 I never told anyone as I knew I was mad and I was very worried I would be taken away just like my cousin who was taken away at the age of 18 due to schizophrenia. Life was unbearable living a life of deception, and feeling like the only mad person on the planet freaking out in silence. This led to further isolation, and the thoughts of suicide began at the age of 12. After 4 serious attempts I was finally found out while living homeless in Perth WA at the age of 23.

I was then admitted to the Fremantle psychiatric facility where I learnt the name of my disorder, yes I had no idea what OCD was called. This led to 8 weeks of good CBT therapy and many in hospital goal setting, educational training, and confidence boosting treatments with medication. Yet none of this really worked and I was released back to homelessness couch surfing on a newly found friends couch. A month later, thank god, I was accepted into the Fremantle Richmond Fellowship residential facility. Now I must include a 'conflict of interest' that I have now been working as a 'Peer Worker' for 18 years at the Richmond Fellowship of Tasmania. You can read more about my Peer Worker journey in a book; <https://www.flourishaustralia.org.au/peer-work-australia> that I contributed to.

However good these interventions were, I was still suicidal, depressed, alone with no family or friends, and still in serious trouble....So how am I still alive today?

What worked for me.

In the seventh week of my stay in hospital, my nurse introduced me to a bloke that had OCD. Can you imagine how odd this was for me. I was not alone anymore. He encouraged me to attend a 'self-help' group in Perth in 1993 and over the next eight years I weekly met hundreds of families living with OCD.

Cost.

Now I must make one point very clear. This OCD group, led by an amazing individual (supported by me after a year) received over ten years NOT ONE CENT in government funding. Yet connecting with my peers saved my life. At every meeting once a week we asked for a gold coin donation and created a loving, supportive, and vitally 'accepting' environment.

Peer Supports and acceptance.

Now I need you to understand that consumer hold the answers and collective wisdom for living with mental illness. I will give you three examples. Firstly I had since I was 7 yrs old had a crippling fear of sweating from my forehead. Whenever I was running around and started sweating I would go home. This led to isolation and extreme fear while doing my apprenticeship and nearly took my life due to irrational fear. I mentioned this to clinical people and was prescribed Valium. When I mentioned it in the OCD self-help group

everyone went silent in contemplation....Then one father of a child with OCD said to me “why don’t you try to wear a cancer council bandanna on your head to cover it up. This saved my life, I am not overestimating this in exaggeration at all, and at the age of 49 I still have a bandanna in my back pocket every day and occasionally put it on today when stressed. My second tale of consumer knowledge came to a woman in the group who had never been on holiday because she had a OCD fear of contamination, especially the fear of using a hotel shower. Again a group of her peers got thinking and fell silent in the group meeting....Then another woman said “why don’t you buy 4 pairs of thongs and after each shower throw them out?”. Then next time we saw her she came back in tears celebrating tales of her first holiday with her kids (I’m tearing up now remembering that day). Consumers have knowledge and creativity that the medical model is suppressing, not engaging with. When I left the hospital the chief psychiatrist in WA told me that if I stopped trying new pills to ‘cure’ my OCD I would return “every six months”, to which I told him “no way mate”. And I have never been back to hospital.

Not that I was ever cured, but finding ‘acceptance’ of life with OCD was the answer for me. This was in the 90’s and every clinical person in the world would continue to tell people living with OCD that ‘cure’ was possible and was the only treatment. However, what consumers in our group knew very well, and clinicians had no idea of was that we will lie every time to get out of brutal de-sensitisation treatments. Kids lie when treatments that are torturous and kids tell clinicians, with fingers crossed lying through their desperate teeth, that “yes doctor I am cured”, and then go home.

For a decade I rallied against these de-sensitisation treatments and voiced the benefits of ‘acceptance’ of OCD as the way to best live with OCD. Yet after years of trying to convince clinicians I gave up trying to convince them in advocacy. Only a month ago now, when I found myself in a bout of serious depression again I was handed a document from a psychologist with the title *Embracing Your Demons: an Overview of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy* (Harris 2006). So after a decade clinicians have caught up with consumer knowledge.

Love.

One point I have always advocated for in my very fortunate journey in consumer advocacy from my first speaking about OCD in Perth WA at a mental health week event with 250 people in the audience in 1993 to representing Tasmanian consumers on the NMHCCF, including contributing to the Fourth National Mental Health Plan Implementation Cross Sectoral Working Group.

One clear point that I have always made was that when I fell in love three months after leaving the Richmond Fellowship I stopped feeling depressed all together. For 8 years I knew happiness and never thought of suicide. Unfortunately this did not last, but for 8 years I was still living with OCD, but was not depressed at all.

The power of love.

Harris R, 2006 *Embracing Your Demons: an Overview of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy*, PSYCHOTHERAPY IN AUSTRALIA • VOL 12 NO 4 • AUGUST 2006