

Board & Care Quality

F O R U M

Published by Reisacher Petro and Associates

Vol. 10

No. 2

March/April 2007

The Journey of Recovery from a Severe, Persistent Mental Illness

In this interview, we talk with a 60-year old woman who is a professional in the healthcare industry. She first had symptoms of mental illness in her early twenties and then more seriously in her thirties, but it was not until she was about forty-five that her illness was finally diagnosed as bipolar disorder II. She speaks candidly with us about her experiences with mental illness, including the things that have helped and hindered her recovery journey. She also offers practical suggestions for home operators and staff about how they can support residents who have severe, persistent mental health problems as they pursue their own journeys of recovery.

Looking back, when and how did you start to experience symptoms of mental illness?

“I knew that I was moody. My mom always referred to me that way, and I took offense at it, but at the same time, I would be quite tearful at times for no reason that I could identify.

“When my first child was born, I was 21 years old, and I had a horrible time with postpartum depression. By the time I was 23 or 24, after both my children were

born, my husband suggested that I go back to school and take some courses. He was thinking that maybe I just needed to get out of the house. I did that and stopped in to talk to one of my teachers one day, and I burst into tears for no reason. He taught my psychology course, and he was clueless about what was going on as well.

“I remember at one point calling a psychologist and saying that I had some problems. But when I told that person that my husband was a psychologist, she said ‘Oh, well then, you have nothing to worry about; you must be just fine.’ I don’t know what her thinking was behind that comment--perhaps she thought that if something was wrong, he would have recognized it. And I think my husband did realize that something was wrong, but he didn’t know what. Sometimes it is ‘hard to see the forest for the trees’ -- to recognize a problem when you are in the middle of it.

“I remember in my twenties, on my birthday, my husband had bought me this really cute tennis outfit, and I could not stop crying. I wasn’t crying from joy, and I wasn’t crying from sadness. I was just crying. I remember my daughter saying to my mother, ‘We gave her this pretty outfit, and she cried all over it.’

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