

## **7 Things You Must Know About Being Mentally Healthy**

### **My Recipe for Success**

**This recipe is adapted from my book:**

**“Being Mentally Healthy (in spite of a mental illness)” by Elizabeth Anderson.**

Being mentally healthy while having a mental illness requires six ingredients: timely intervention; the right meds; supportive people (especially loved ones); a reason to be well; a reason to hope; something important to do or a higher purpose or calling.

#### **1. Timely Intervention**

Intervention is key since often there is a lack of insight because the part of the brain that would make a person aware is broken. If I don't think I am sick, I am not going to go to the doctor to get treatment. I was in this frame of mind before Deanna (my best friend) and Wade (my husband) intervened. I did not realize I needed help until after I was admitted to hospital. I am well because I had help accessing medical services. After an intervention, there must be a decision to accept and work with the illness while basing future decisions on what is best now that a new reality, which includes an illness, exists.

#### **2. The Right Medication**

My psychiatrist figured out the medication. Medication is essential to correcting the imbalance in the brain. There should be no shame in taking medication for a mental illness. Why is it any different than taking an aspirin for a headache or insulin for diabetes? The brain needs a corrective measure and the medication provides the correction – it is medication for an imbalance.

The medication mix is a conundrum. Doctors do their best to find the right medication. Finding the right medication is achieved through trial and error, which can create frustration for the patient and the doctor. Even then, the medication can stop working for no apparent reason. I am now on three antipsychotics, but it took several years to find the right combination.

Now is the best time in history to have a diagnosis. In the past, people were institutionalized because there were no effective medications. Since 1990, medication can work on both the active and passive symptoms. For the first time, people with schizophrenia have the chance to lead a satisfying life.

#### **3. Supportive People**

Supportive people, including my mom, my siblings, my phone support team and Wade, have been essential to my wellness. In addition, I have had supportive people, such as Fay, appear at just the right time in my life. Fay appeared after my diagnosis when I was searching for a purpose to my life. She inspired me to help in the fight to end the stigma of mental illness by joining the Partnership Program at the Schizophrenia Society.

One day, I asked Fay if I had grown. She laughed and put her hand up to her nose like she was tickled with disbelief that I had asked her such a silly question. “Elizabeth, don’t you remember you used to sit at the end of my desk and sleep? We would poke you if you were sleeping too loudly. Mary would cover you up with your coat and I would just say to the people who came into my office to meet with me ‘She is alright. Just let her sleep. She is not hurting anything.’ And then at 3:30, we would wake you up and send you home.” Fay accepts me and the illness and tries to accommodate the needs the illness dictates.

My mom, of course, was a main support for me. I am glad that neither of us gave up on our relationship. Like many people do, I had conflicts with my mother. Things were rocky, but I always knew deep down she loved me and that I loved her. She kept connected by giving me plates, she always paid for my university, and we always had fun shopping. In her later years, I would go and visit her at the nursing home and we would eat dinner together. Even though the full healing that took place had not transpired yet, she would listen to my problems and I would come away with hope knowing she was rooting for me. When we did resolve our differences, there was nothing but a sense of peace and comfort, which I still feel when I think about her.

All three of my brothers and their families are supportive people in my life. Peace in my family relationships is a gift to me.

Illness can be tricky to navigate when someone is isolated. It is important to have supportive people to get well and keep well. The people I mentioned above are examples of some of the people who act as my support system and supportive people can be found in different areas of life. Having supportive people can be a kind of first aid when you have problems or need to process experiences. Some people remind you to have fun and not be so results focused; other people understand because they can relate to what you have experienced or know you well enough to give advice.

Knowing people who can help me gives me an emotional safety net. The emotions are real even if the details of the experience may not be. I try to know what I need and I am creative about getting my needs met. I have a phone list of people to phone when I need help and everyone knows I have other people to call if they are busy. Different people have different support roles: some provide crisis intervention when I am having a bad day; some give advice in a specific area; and some provide general support. Wade, of course, is supportive at all times and helps me in all areas.

#### **4. A Reason to Be Well**

Wade is my reason to be well. I would like to think that I can be well for my own sake; however, my self-esteem fluctuates and so this is not the case. I need a second reason when I am not feeling well because my motivation to try to stay well can dwindle. At those times, I am able to convince myself it is worth the effort to try to stay well so Wade can have a good life. Lack of motivation is one symptom that makes it hard for me to maintain any momentum. It can be very debilitating when I don’t feel like doing something even if it is important to me. Some days, I just don’t have the strength physically or emotionally to get or keep going. Some days the illness wins and I have

learned to just try again the next day and not get upset with myself. Wade reminds me that my efforts have positive effects on our life which helps me want to be well so I can be an equal partner.

I have learned I can have a relapse and then the journey to be well starts all over again. When I am not well I rely on Wade to make decisions for me and need his perspective as a reality check. Wade has always been a central, stabilizing force in my life and I feel the need to try to stay well so the effects of the illness on our lives are minimal and we can have the best life possible. I want him to be proud of me for doing the best I can.

## **5. A Reason to Hope**

In addition, for me, God has been there through it all; He is the reason I have hope. This book is the way I am serving God, and I have used what I have been through to inform my purpose in life which is what I am asked to do. I want to educate people about mental illness and, perhaps, help people be closer to God. When I talk about my faith, I just say “I have shopped around and I have found Jesus is the best deal.” In my experience, He has always fulfilled his promises to me. Even when I gave up when my mom was in a coma the first time, He answered my prayer for a second chance at our relationship and then over-delivered by completely healing my relationship with my mom before she died. I have been cautioned not to mention God in my story, but if this is my recipe for success. I can't leave out the baking powder that makes the rest of the ingredients work together. I had to do what I could and leave the rest up to God. I also know your beliefs are your business. Everyone has to figure out spiritual matters for themselves.

In my experience, God has slowly earned my trust and in so doing has given me hope because I know whatever I am facing, I am not alone in my struggle. If God really is God then He can do anything, including solve my problems whether big and little. As my spiritual strength has increased, my symptoms have decreased. There is a correlation. God has not healed me completely, but it is much easier to cope knowing that someone has my back. Knowing that God has my back gives me hope.

## **6. Something Important To Do**

While taking the journey, I found a higher purpose. I needed to make sense of my experiences, and I have found that sharing my story gives my suffering meaning. I share my story through writing and speaking. Writing my book Being Mentally Healthy has been a kind of therapy, it gave me a sense of coherence.

As well as writing, I enjoy the opportunity to speak. I have been speaking for the Schizophrenia Society since 1995. I find it is important to talk about my journey if there is ever to be an end to the stigma associated with mental illness. I know what I have learned can ease other people's journey – no matter how they connect with my story. The connections they make and the hints/inspiration/information they take away give my suffering a broader meaning. I have started my own publishing/speaking company and am a professional working speaker; I am spreading my message of hope that one can recover from a mental illness.

## 7. You Can Help Yourself or Someone You Love

Schizophrenia is a life-long biological illness of the brain, but recovery is possible. In this list of 7 things you must know about being mentally healthy, I have identified the steps I took to get better; I have given you my recipe for success. You, or someone you know with a diagnosis, can be mentally healthy in spite of a mental illness. Having a disability, like a mental illness, means that people have unique challenges but they are not insurmountable. All people with schizophrenia are seeking is a good life.

If you know someone who has a mental illness, acceptance is the first step. Accepting the individuals and the illness is an act of giving hope to someone who may have lost sight of their own strength to handle day to day challenges or bigger issues like the “why now?” feeling when symptoms and related difficulties seem to overtake life. Remind them who they are – they are not the illness. Someone who has schizophrenia has been through a tough experience and may have forgotten that they can be well again. Someone can be well even if they experience symptoms at times. Keep a vision of their wellness in mind when interacting with them – it is a gift.

If you have the illness, know **there is hope**. With support and making wellness the first priority, you have the best chance to be well. My hope is that you will take my ideas and adapt them to your own situation.

Remember, being mentally healthy is a journey, not the destination.

Thanks for caring about mental illness.  
Your awareness and actions make a difference!

Take good care,

Elizabeth Anderson

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