

In My Own Words

In My Own Words is an emerging series of first-person recovery stories published by the **Center for Evidence-Based Practices** at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio with support from the **Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services**.

www.centerforebp.case.edu



An Introduction to the Series

—by Nicole Clevenger

Marvelous examples of nature's tenacity can be found all around us: plants sprouting from sidewalk cracks, delicate webs and intricately woven nests fashioned in seemingly impossible places, huge canyons carved by small but steady streams. There are countless examples of the enormous capacity for human persistence as well. *In My Own Words* is an evolving collection of these narratives.

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AMAZING FORTITUDE

Stories about people living successfully with mental illness are often not among the most popular. In addition, the stories that are reported seem to include many examples of people living with mental illness and substance abuse—and not living so successfully. Sadly, it is the most extreme and unpleasant portraits of people with these disorders that appear to qualify as news, but the real truth is this: ordinary people everywhere are living well, despite the challenges of mental illness and substance abuse. They carry out acts of amazing fortitude, both small and large, on a daily basis. These are people who have made the decision to continue pushing forward in the face of overwhelming adversity.

POWER IN TELLING

Struggles with mental illness and substance abuse are often well-kept secrets, which is no big surprise given the amount of misinformation that exists about these topics. Equally unfortunate is the fact that recovery is often hidden. As a result, too many people suffer in silence unnecessarily with symptoms. They lose hope of finding a better way, in large part, because they have not heard stories about other peo-

ple who are reclaiming their lives and moving on from very difficult, potentially traumatic experiences.

Likewise, many family members and treatment providers do not hear these stories and, thus, lose optimism over time about the potential of long-term recovery for the people they have been attempting to help. Sadly, family caregivers and professional service providers do not hear enough about

- The person who *did* pick up the phone and ask for help
- The person who stood at the edge ... and *did not* jump
- The person who dug down deep and faced the hurt
- The person who didn't give into the craving of addiction
- The person who decided to be the parent
- The person who chose to find a job
- The person who committed to living life to the fullest extent possible

THE TRUTH

These stories of survival are out there. There are thousands of them. So why are they not being told? Part of the answer has to do with fear and stigma.



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Celebrating the success of rebuilding one's life after the devastation that can be caused by mental illness and/or substance abuse requires that those challenges be revealed to and known by others. However, it can feel risky to expose this part of oneself, despite whatever pride is felt about the progress. Fear of judgment from others can stop the conversation about recovery before it even starts.

PLACE FOR CHANGE

The Center for Evidence-Based Practices at Case Western Reserve University is providing a forum for people to tell their success stories, not only to help start conversations about their recovery but also to help change the nature of conversations about mental illness and substance abuse. It is our hope that this evolving series of first-person success stories, *In My Own Words*, might inspire a shift in focus from illness to wellness.

Look at it this way. The difference between the words *illness* and *wellness* is the difference of a few letters, of changing *i* to *w* and *e*. With this transformation, we can look past limitations toward possibilities. We can shift the gaze away from that which is broken toward a focus upon journeys of healing, stories about pathways to wellness, examples of getting beyond the problems. We can also begin to use the word *us* in place of *them*. After all, *they* are neighbors, friends, family members, co-workers, maybe even ourselves.

PEER SUPPORT

Our Center is launching *In My Own Words* as a part of the Ohio Peer-Support Initiative, funded by the Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services (OhioMHAS). Because of the state's investment, people in Ohio who wish to use their experiences with mental illness and/or substance abuse to help others are now getting training and certification to work in service organizations, so they can support and hopefully inspire others who face struggles similar to their own.

Of course, valuing a person's lived experiences and including support from peers in the continuum of mental health services is not a new idea. Peer support has been implemented quite successfully in other states and countries for some time. The Netherlands is one of these places. We will share some stories that highlight peer support (what they call, *experience workers*) from there as well.

FIRST-PERSON STORIES

We hope you will see in this emerging series of first-person stories that people are doing what it takes, daily and deliberately, to live satisfying lives, despite the obstacles they may face in the process. In this series, we celebrate ordinary people who are doing extraordinary things, and we thank them for having the courage to share their experiences.



Nicole Clevenger, BFA, consultant and trainer for SE/IPs initiatives

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In My Own --- *Words*

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ABOUT US

In My Own Words is an emerging series of first-person recovery stories published by the Center for Evidence-Based Practices at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio. This series is supported by the Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services (OhioMHAS). We thank all the people who courageously share their success stories. You inspire hope. You provide evidence of positive changes that are possible.

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