Change is something that always seemed impossible to me. I felt imprisoned by my experiences in childhood, and there was no way out. The majority of my life was spent in abusive relationships. I was homeless, incarcerated, and had addictions to drugs and alcohol. Anyone in these circumstances would feel discouraged and hopeless about life. I can remember feeling that death would not come soon enough. However, life did change for me when a judge ordered me to receive mental health services at Neighboring*.

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SHAME & ADDICTION
Let me start at the beginning of my story. My memories of childhood consist of my sister and me enduring mental and physical abuse from family members. This instilled feelings of shame that possessed my thoughts every waking moment of life. All the abuse that I encountered had taken me prisoner and made life unbearable. At twelve-years old, I tried alcohol and life began to change. The abuse from my family finally became tolerable, because the alcohol gave me the power not to care about the circumstances. I felt that my problems had been solved, not realizing I had just thrown gasoline on a fire.

Drugs also came into my life at this time. I instantly felt more normal than ever before. I was so used to feeling full of shame. Alcohol and drugs made my insecurities go away and gave me a reason to wake up in the morning. My alcohol and drug use quickly grew into a daily habit. If I were to continue living, I needed to have something to numb the feelings of shame that were constantly in my head. Alcohol and drugs became a way of survival for me and an obsession that controlled every thought and action in my life, just as the shame had.

Using substances to quiet thoughts of shame was like trading one evil for another. There was a bigger problem, though. There were not enough substances to keep the shame from coming back. The shame always returned with more intensity, therefore, causing me to use substances increasingly. Every moment in my life involved seeking out alcohol and drugs.

Then, I had two beautiful children.

MOTHERHOOD
I never wanted my children to be exposed to the abuse that I encountered during my childhood. I was not mentally or physically abusive to my children in the same ways I had experienced, but I was neglectful and careless with their well-being. I intended to be a good parent; however, my own childhood circumstances were never dealt with. I became a functioning alcoholic/addict for the first five years of motherhood, and I chose to be with men who were physically and mentally abusive. Eventually, my substance abuse became unmanageable and my mother obtained custody of my children. No words can describe how painful this was.

Another part of my jail sentence was to go to Neighboring for mental health services. ... There was a part of me that believed my issues were unchangeable. As this shame began to control my thoughts, I did something different. I finally started to utilize the services at Neighboring.
for me. Most people might think this would have given me the motivation to become sober. This was not the case. My life became a suicide mission. I was homeless, selling drugs, and involved in other illegal activity. Honestly, I cannot believe that I survived, because I had no intention to. Then, I was arrested, and my life began to change.

**MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES**

Another part of my jail sentence was to go to Neighboring for mental health services. I did not see the value in this. There was a part of me that believed my issues were unchangeable. As this shame began to control my thoughts, I did something different. I finally started to utilize the services at Neighboring. With the help of dedicated staff there, I have been able to manage my mind with therapy and medications. This has been a slow and painful process but well worth the time and effort.

I have gradually started to think about my circumstances and myself in a better light. Now life has meaning for me. I am eager to wake up in the morning. I no longer feel imprisoned by the past. Because of therapy, I was able to forgive and understand that my abusers were sick, just as I was sick. The biggest blessing of all was regaining custody of my children. This was an important change. Unquestionably, the services at Neighboring encouraged me to think better about my circumstances and myself. As I have said, life keeps changing. … Now I can, too.

—by Kerri Varsetti

*Editor’s note: Neighboring is now called Beacon Health.*
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