WE BELIEVE RECOVERY IS POSSIBLE!

Editors:
Marcy Gray
Paul Reeve
Kathy Bazinet

Cover Design: Marcey Gray

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A recovery system is driven by recovery values and principles.

**Recovery Values**

Recovery is a process, a journey designed by the individual. There is a belief in a person’s ability to recover, and there is hope about the future. Supporting recovery is about meeting and accepting people for who they are, as that is their own greatest strength. We recognize that pace of each individual’s recovery is self-determined.

A recovery-oriented addiction and mental health system of care* will:

- **Encourage Hope** – Recovery cannot occur without hope. The system will encourage hope, focusing on people’s skills and abilities.

- **Value Empowerment** – The system will provide individuals with opportunities to exercise control and power with respect to their lives.

- **Value Self-Determination** – The system will recognize and accept that individuals will make their own life decisions.

- **Value Meaningful Choice** – The system will recognize and accept that individuals should have an unlimited number of choices.
of choices from which to make their own life decisions. All individuals are entitled to the dignity of risk that is inherent in making choices.

- **Strive to Eliminate Prejudice and Discrimination** – The system will work to eliminate prejudice and discrimination toward people with mental health and addictions issues.

**Recovery Principles**
The addiction and mental health system of care will foster and develop attitudes and beliefs about individuals based upon the principles:

- **Recovery Skills** – Individuals will have opportunities and will be supported in their efforts to learn how to: express feelings, define self-care techniques, take personal responsibility, and set personal goals. The achieve this, the system of care will support:
  - **Personal Development** – The system will focus on supporting individuals to learn skills and encourage opportunities that allow for personal growth and development.
  - **The On-Going Development of the Addiction and Mental Health System of Care** – Individuals who have used addiction and mental health services will be involved in all aspects of system design and implementation.

- **Recovery Identity** – Individuals will be encouraged and supported to see themselves as people with unique skills and abilities, not as patients or diagnoses. As a result, people will feel and act as whole individuals with influence over all aspects of their lives. To do this, the addiction and
mental health system of care will:

- **Adopt a Wellness Approach** – Health is more than the absence of illness. A wellness approach encourages health lifestyle choices and is not just treatment of illness.

- **Adopt a Holistic Approach** – An individual recognized as a whole person, not just a diagnostic label. A holistic approach recognizes that people are physical, mental, emotional and spiritual beings. Therefore, this approach includes but is not limited to meaningful activities and paid employment, peer support and relationships, family support, spirituality, clinical care, power and control, community involvement, and access to resources and education.

- **View People as Having a Life Beyond the Addiction and Mental Health System of Care** – Individuals leave the system. Servicers are still available if needed but people are not viewed as, or expected to be, life-long participants.

- **Recovery Communities** – The system will adopt the principle that having a valued social role, a recovery-focused environment and opportunities to help others is important to an individual’s recovery. To achieve this, the system of care will:
  
  - **Treat all Individuals with Dignity and Respect**
  
  - **Help Individuals to View Themselves as Valuable and Contributing Community Members** – The system will support and
encourage all individuals with opportunities to contribute to society. The system will see and treat individuals as citizens of their communities with all the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.

- **Support the Community to Become a Place Where Individuals Recover** – The system will value, support and assist in the development of significant relationships that play a key role in an individual’s recovery process.

- **Use Recovery-Oriented Language** – The addiction and mental health system of care will use language that is respectful and without prejudice, bigotry or discrimination. The language used to communicate with people about services and supports will be understandable.

- **Recovery Relationships** – Vital to any individual’s recovery is knowing there are people who believe in and care about you. Having relationships with people who never give up on you and let you recover at your own pace, will always be important. The system will nurture the development of these relationships, and:

  - **Support the Growth and Contribution of Peer to Peer Connections in the recovery process**
  
  - **Support the Role that Family and Friends Play in the recovery process**
  
  - **Support the Unique Needs that Families, Friends and Caregivers have in their loved one’s recovery**
• **Support and Encourage Staff who provide services to individuals while they recover**

* addiction and mental health system of care: the entire addiction and mental health service delivery system, including hospitals and institutions, community-based services, peer support groups and organizations, and any government or government-sponsored organization involved in the planning, policy development, evaluation and delivery of addiction and mental health services.
Editor’s Note by Marcey Gray

Program Coordinator
Spark of Brilliance

Thank you to Kathy Bazinet for providing me with the opportunity to work on this project. I have enjoyed every moment!

Thank you to Paul Reeve for sharing his insight, advocacy expertise, and valuable input.

Thank you to Diane Eastham, long-time Spark of Brilliance supporter and author of Blaze of Colour, Embracing Creativity, for her involvement in this project. Throughout a 6-week workshop series, Diane’s patient teaching and compassionate leadership skills enabled participants to share their stories of self-advocacy, many for the first time. Without Diane’s guidance, the stories shared within these pages may never have come to light.

Thank you to the artists. Through each stroke of your paintbrush, the colour of your lives painted stories that could not be expressed in words, but will surely be understood by all.

Thank you to the authors and poets. I am honoured to have been in your presence during the writing of your stories. Your bravery, resiliency and fortitude are celebrated within the pages of this book, and will undoubtedly touch many lives.
Advocacy Coordinator
Self Help Alliance

Advocacy has been such an important part of my personal recovery and my work over the past 20 years. What a privilege to walk beside so many courageous people as they have addressed the wrongs and injustices in their lives. As I worked on this book I was reminded of a picture where a frog is about to be eaten by a large bird and the frog grips its’ hands around the bird’s neck with the caption being “NEVER GIVE UP”. That has motivated me for many years.

I trust you will be as inspired as I have reading these stories and poems and seeing the artwork. They confirm the strength of our human spirit to overcome adversity.

Whether the issue is big or small, advocacy is as much about staying in the process as it is in winning a particular battle. While the outcomes are never certain we can be assured that advocating helps us to grow and strengthen as individuals and this often influences the system as a whole to change for the better.

I was honoured to be asked to coedit this book and it has been a pleasure to work with Marcey Gray (who did the greater share of the work in this capacity).
Editor’s Note by Kathy Bazinet
Manager
Self Help Alliance

It is my honour and privilege to introduce this wonderful work, Finding My Way: Self-Advocacy. This is our third publication in the Finding My Way series, and like the Personal Recovery Guide and Stories of Recovery, I am very excited to get such valuable information into your hands.

This incredible work comes as a result of a very generous donation inspired by the belief in people’s ability to recover, and in recognition that at times the recovery journey includes the need for self-advocacy. We are so very grateful for such a large donation, and the recognition of the meaningful work we at the Self Help Alliance are doing.

The journey of recovery includes finding one’s voice – giving voice to one’s experience, issues and needs. You will find within these pages, the stories of folks who have found their voice and have had the courage to bring this to light. A very heartfelt thank you goes out to the many who have contributed their insightful stories and art work, and in doing so have stepped into the vulnerability of having one’s self expressions in print. They know the value for those who will read and learn from those who have walked the path before them.

A special thank you goes to Paul Reeve for his tremendous support in creating and implementing this project. Paul is the chief author of the majority of content within this work. His depth of knowledge, many years of experience and
valued skills are shared with you the reader, in the hope that it will serve you as well as it has many others through the years.

Thank you to Marcey Gray, under whose leadership, this wonderful project has had a positive impact on many people’s lives long before it even went to print. Not only did Marcey organize and implement the details involved in pulling this all together, but she also worked with our contributors to put voice to their stories either in writing, poetry, or art.

We at Self Help Alliance hope that you, the reader find this information meaningful, supportive and inspiring in your personal journey of self-advocacy.
Section 1: Introduction to Advocacy
“Self-Expression through Pain” - Rachel
As users of mental health and addiction services, we face many obstacles in our lives, and often we may face these obstacles alone. Therefore, it is important for us to learn to advocate for ourselves, for others we care about, and for an improved mental health and addiction system. Learning about advocacy will help us to identify obstacles, develop strategies to overcome them and then implement these plans. Although we may be discouraged from standing up for ourselves, advocacy is possible for everyone.

Advocating for yourself is essential for two basic reasons. An obvious reason is that there are insufficient advocacy resources to fully assist every individual with lived experience of the mental health and addiction system. Although we may have advocates in our lives, such as family, friends, peers, medical professionals, social workers and lawyers to help us with some of our needs, many needs go unmet.

Mary Ellen Copeland, mental health advocate and person with lived experience, offers another reason that self-advocacy is essential: “The number one reason is that I’m the only person who has to live my life. Nobody else can know what I really need. Other people can look at me and say what they think, but it is very important for me to ask for what I want.”

Even when we do have an advocate working for us, active participation in the process can help you obtain what you want and need.

You can be an advocate for yourself, and while you may need some help along the way, it can make you stronger and help you feel better about yourself.
A Way to Look at Self-Advocacy

You might think of yourself as a bus driver. You drive your bus and can have as many passengers as you want. You can ask a particular passenger to come on board, and you can have the right to ask passengers to leave. You can ask passengers questions along the way. You decide when you step on the brake or the accelerator and what direction to steer. You can park the bus at any time for as long as you want, so you can figure out where you can to go next.

You are capable, worthy and responsible for driving your bus, and you can take as much time as you need along the route. You may want someone to help you navigate your way.

Sometimes it seems your road is leading nowhere. That often happens in life, and if you want, you can choose to turn around, go back to where you started and try a new direction.

Keeping Yourself Safe
Whatever road you choose, whatever circumstances you find yourself in and whatever challenges you face, the first objective need to be to keep yourself safe. Sometimes people react from feelings such as anger and end up getting themselves into a new and/or difficult situation. Think carefully before you act and get help when and where you need it.
**Definition of Advocacy**

“One of the best causes is me” – Paul Reeve

Advocacy is speaking up for yourself or others. It is attempting to change how things work in order to change how things are. Advocacy is empowering yourself, and a way to find your voice when people are not paying attention to your needs and rights.

**Self-Advocacy Is:**
- Getting what you want
- Standing up for your rights
- Speaking or acting for yourself
- Fighting for a cause
- Fighting for your personal rights and/or against personal discrimination
- Deciding what is right for you and taking charge of getting it

**Advocacy** is the pursuit of influencing outcomes — including public policy and resource allocation decisions within political, economic, and social systems and institutions — that directly affect people’s current lives.

**What is your own definition of Advocacy?**

(Source: Advocacy for social justice. D.R. Cohen.)
Reasons to Become a Self-Advocate

It is all about *voice and choice*! In order for others to know that you disagree with them or that your rights have been disregarded, **you need to tell them**!

You know best what you feel, think, need and what your life situation is. Do not wait for others speak up on your behalf – it may never happen!

The people who have the authority to make decisions over your situation may think that everything is fine if you do not speak up.

By speaking out, you may be helping other people in the same or similar situations.

You have a responsibility to take care of yourself. Speaking out will help you to keep your self-respect and dignity, even if you do not always get what you want.

Remember that rules may not always be fair or suitable for you. You have the right to question rules, as they may not apply to your situation.

**What are some other reasons you can think of for becoming a Self-Advocate?**
**Benefits of Self-Advocacy**

By being a self-advocate, you will also learn about your rights (or if your rights are being abused), and develop your self-confidence. Self-advocacy can help you realize your strengths. You will learn new things; and knowledge is power, and the key to open new doors.

Self-advocacy requires persistence but offers great rewards. Some people believe that those who advocate for themselves are the ones who achieve the highest level of recovery.

An old adage says, “The squeaky wheel gets the grease.” People are more likely to respond to you if they are not given the opportunity to forget about you and your situation. It is important to remember that a polite, non-threatening manner is often responded to in the most productive ways.

Some of the benefits of becoming an effective advocate for yourself also include learning skills like:

- Speaking and writing
- Problem Solving
- Managing Conflict
- Effective Communication
- Leadership
- Membership in a community
- Assertiveness
Section 2: Attitudes Necessary for Self-Advocacy
Defining Attitude

**attitude** noun \a-ta-, tüd, -tyüd\  
: the way you think and feel about someone or something  
: a feeling or way of thinking that affects a person's behavior  
: a way of thinking and behaving that people regard as unfriendly, rude, etc.

“The longer I live, the more I realize the impact of attitude on life. It is more important than the past, than education, than money, than circumstances, than failures, than successes, than what other people think or say or do. It is more important than appearance, giftedness or skill.

The remarkable thing is that we have a choice every day of our lives regarding the attitude we embrace for that day. We cannot change the past. We cannot change the fact that people will act in a certain way. We cannot change the inevitable. The only thing we can do is play on the one string we have, and that is our attitude. I’m convinced that life is 10% what happens to me and 90% how I react to it. And so it is with you. We are in charge of our attitudes”.

- Charles Swindoll (1987), a clergyman

What does attitude mean to you?
**Attitudes Necessary for Self-Advocacy**

Many of us worry that we cannot advocate for ourselves. However, anyone can be an advocate; even a 2 year old is advocating for themselves by letting you know when they want something. Of course, advocating is not always so simple, but repeatedly, people share stories of how they surprised themselves with their own power to advocate.

As an early step to achieving your self-advocacy goals, you might need to spend some time developing the attitudes necessary to reach those goals. For some people, it may mean being more assertive, while for others it means taming aggressions. Above all, self-advocacy requires developing a belief in yourself!

**Believing in Yourself**

As individuals with lived experience of the mental health and addiction system, we may face many obstacles in our lives, and sometimes we must face these obstacles alone.

“Self-advocacy requires an internal belief that you are someone who is worth advocating for,” says Clearinghouse program director Marie Verna. “As mental health consumers, we are often led to believe that we're not worth advocating for,” she continues, “and we have to change this belief in order to take advantage of advocacy training.”

Individuals who have been involved in self-advocacy also agree that once you become involved, the rewards multiply. Success improves your self-esteem. The more you reach out and get what you need, the better you feel about yourself. Although self-advocacy means taking responsibility for getting what you want, it does not mean that you have to do it alone. You can find people to help you.
Seven Tips for Self-Belief

Why you need self-belief
Self-belief is vital. How many things have you avoided because you lacked belief in yourself? Many fail to believe in themselves because others did not. As Eleanor Roosevelt so deftly put it:

“Nobody can make you feel inferior without your consent.”

Yet self-doubts creep in. Like unwelcome houseguests that keep calling round simply because you played host to them before. Doubts such as:

- Can I really do this?
- Other people are better, smarter, more worthy than me.
- What will other people think if I do/say this?
- I cannot risk failure.
- Success is for others but not for the likes of me.

If you sometimes have trouble believing in yourself then read, absorb, enjoy, and practice these self-belief tips:

Tip 1 – Remember self-belief is learnable
Just as you have learned to doubt yourself from what others have said or past experiences, you can also learn to believe in yourself. Your level of self-belief is not set in stone - not unchangeable.

One of the first steps is to re-examine and discard many of the limiting ideas you have about yourself; ideas that you have somehow collected along the way.
Tip 2 – Deal with the inner negative voice
When you start to doubt yourself, listen for a moment to that little negative inner voice. Whose voice is it really? A parent’s, old school bullies? A collection of lots of different voices from different times and people? One thing’s for sure - that little, inner self-critical voice was not yours originally. It may masquerade as belonging to you now, but it really does not.

Tell yourself: “This is not my true voice!” Then start to challenge it and just plain ignore it.

Tip 3 – Flip weakness into strength
If we just focus on what is not right about ourselves rather than what is, then we miss opportunities for self-belief. We should not assume there is nothing to improve about ourselves, by just focusing on perceived weaknesses without either: a) taking steps to improve them, or b) recognizing and using our strengths, gets us nowhere.

For example, if you know that you can be stubborn then find the positive in this.Stubbornness used well is called single-minded determination. If you worry a lot, know that the positive, flipside of this is that you have a powerful imagination, which in the right context, can be put to good use.

Take any negative belief you have about yourself and creatively flip it so that it becomes, in its place, a positive resource.

Tip 4 – Develop your “super powers”!
Think of the typical powers of the more popular superheroes and write them down before you start your day. They may be such things as super speed, the ability to climb walls, flight, x-ray vision...whatever. Why do this? Because “priming” your
mind with qualities and positive characteristics can actually determine your behaviour.

You likely will not start flying to the rescue of stranded citizens, but the pattern of superhero powers is one of ability, courage, and competence. In one study, people who were asked to write down as many super powers as they could think of were more likely to give to charity months afterward. The pattern of giving to charity is that of being able. Prime your mind with “able words” before you start each day.

As well as superhero powers, write all kinds of other positive characteristics (whether you think you have them or not). Do this before you go out. For example:

- Strength
- Dignity
- Calm
- Intelligence
- Humour
- Generosity
- Charisma
- Sex appeal
- Approachability
- Quick wittedness
- Popularity
- Determination

Do not focus on your own present or future qualities, just on the words. Take a few moments to write them down each day, then a few moments to read your list. Reflect upon what each word means to you.

You will be amazed how doing this will powerfully prime your unconscious mind.
Tip 5 – Be your own motivational coach
If you notice doubts rearing their ugly heads, imagine you are the coach and the anxious part of you is the person you need to talk to.

Think what you would say to someone you really believe in if they started showing doubts. Sit down and say those same things to yourself. For example, if you need to confront your doctor for not listening to your needs, you can say to yourself:

“Look, you can do this! It is natural to feel a little anxious, but that just means taking care of yourself is important to you. Now get in there and stop whining! If the doctor does not listen, you still do not have to fill the prescription.”

Tip 6 – Do “hero training”
Hero training is a great way to increase your own self-belief.

Think of a situation in which lack of self-belief holds you back. Now think of your “hero” - this could be a world leader, a movie hero, or someone you admire in your life.

Now close your eyes and strongly imagine them dealing with the situation “heroically”.

Imagine being them for a few moments, experiencing that time in their shoes. Keep doing this until you notice you can start to transfer a sense of their qualities to yourself.

Tip 7 – Create a powerful vision of yourself
Self-belief comes not just by trying to convince yourself you can do stuff.
True self-belief actually comes from developing the vision that you can relax socially, write that letter, call that worker or whatever it is that you need to believe you can do or be.

Get into the habit of sitting down, closing your eyes, and watching yourself behaving decisively, calmly, and strongly. This powerful visualization exercise means you can learn from yourself how to be confident, have self-belief, and behave in ways, which maximize chances of success.

Imagine you are viewing yourself on a TV screen. The “you” in the screen is showing the 'you' watching how to act with self-belief. The more you do this, the more you will find that you quite naturally start to become like the “you” in the movie.

Self-belief does not mean arrogance or blindness to one's own shortcomings. Then again, it does not mean believing that you are perfect as you are, either. Your self-belief really needs to be focused on what you will become. An important part of self-belief comes from knowing your weaknesses and being relaxed about them.

Self-belief gives you the freedom to make mistakes and cope with setbacks by seeing them for what they are: temporary setbacks, not the end of the world. Something else you will notice: As your self-belief grows, people around you start to believe in you more, too.

(Adapted from: www.uncommonhelp.me/articles/self-belief/)

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Being Assertive

Once you begin to believe in yourself you will find yourself becoming more assertive. While self-esteem is internal, assertiveness shapes the way we deal with others. It is an important skill to learn, especially for those of us with lived experience of the mental health and addictions system. A lack of assertiveness is a primary obstacle to obtaining the services that we want and need. Often, individuals use anger or aggression instead of assertiveness.

To learn more assertive behaviours, there a number of things we can do:

1. Learn why we are not assertive
   For some of us, the moods we experience, such as depression or anxiety, might make us less willing to stand up for ourselves.
   
   Can you think of any thoughts, feelings or experiences from your own life that may prevent you from acting more assertively?

2. Overcome the fear of retaliation or punishment
   Rather than allowing your fears to lead you to procrastinate or remain silent, you can learn to overcome your concerns.
   
   Firstly, ask yourself, “Why am I afraid? What is the worst that can happen?” Secondly, ask yourself, “What will happen if I choose to remain silent?” Then compare your answers.

   You may find that this specific action is not worth completing, and that is ok, just move on to the next one!
3. Practice your skills
There are many counsellors that specialise in assertiveness training, and joining a self-help group is another way to work on your assertiveness skills in a supportive setting.

4. Reward Yourself
Self-advocacy is hard work, and you deserve to reward yourself for every success, big or small. To help yourself make that difficult phone call, set up a reward to give yourself after you make the call, such as a coffee date with a friend or a nice bubble bath.

5. Work with others
You do not have to rely solely on yourself: You can become a more effective self-advocate by working with others to improve your assertiveness skills. Many counsellors specialise in assertiveness training, and joining a self-help group is another good way to work on your assertiveness skills in a supportive setting.

(Adapted from: Self-Advocacy. Self Help Clearinghouse)
Section 3:
Managing Anger
Managing Your Anger

Assertiveness is not the same as aggression. You can be a persistent, tireless advocate for yourself, but you may not do yourself any good if you shout at or insult others in the process. Andrea Stephenson, a person with lived experience who offers advocacy training, suggests, “Assertiveness is being able to say what you need in a respectful and dignified manner.”

When we perceive something as an injustice, our anger can help to motivate us to become involved in self-advocacy. However, it may be more beneficial not to let our anger become a liability for us. If you are able to transfer your anger into positive behaviours, instead of shouting or attacking the character of people, than others will be less defensive and will not be able to use your behaviour as an excuse for denying what you want.

Anger Checklist
Check the box next to the item that pertains to you.

- People tell you that you need to calm down
- You feel tense much of the time
- At work or school, you find yourself not saying what is on your mind
- When you are upset, you try to block the world out by watching TV, reading a book or magazine, or going to sleep
- You are drinking or smoking frequently to help you calm down
- You have trouble going to sleep
- You feel misunderstood or not listened too much of the time
- People ask you not to yell or curse so much
- Your loved ones keep saying that you are hurting them
- Friends do not seek you out as much

**Scoring: count up the number of boxes checked.**

**0-2 = MANAGEABLE:** You may benefit from anger management training.

**3-5 = MODERATE:** You need to learn more about what stresses you out, and develop stress management and emotional intelligence techniques.

**6+ = OUT OF CONTROL:** You have an anger problem and could benefit from learning anger management techniques. You would benefit from an anger management class.

(Source: http://www.acenterforhumanpotential.com/docs/angerchecklist.pdf)
Six Ways to Manage Anger

1. Relaxation
Simple relaxation tools, such as deep breathing and relaxing imagery, can help calm down angry feelings. There are books and courses that can teach you relaxation techniques, and once you learn the techniques, you can call upon them in any situation.

Some simple steps you can try: Breathe deeply, from your diaphragm; breathing from your chest will not relax you. Picture your breath coming up from your “gut.” Slowly repeat a calm word or phrase such as “relax,” “take it easy.” Repeat it to yourself while breathing deeply. Use imagery; visualize a relaxing experience, from either your memory or your imagination. Non-strenuous, slow yoga-like exercises can relax your muscles and make you feel much calmer. Practice these techniques daily. Learn to use them automatically when you are in a tense situation.

2. Cognitive Restructuring
Simply put, this means changing the way you think. Angry people tend to curse, swear, or speak in highly colourful terms that reflect their inner thoughts. When you are angry, your thinking can be exaggerated and overly dramatic.

Try replacing these thoughts with more rational ones.

For instance, instead of telling yourself, “Oh, it’s awful, it’s terrible, everything’s ruined,” tell yourself, “It’s frustrating, and
it’s understandable that I’m upset, but it’s not the end of the world and getting angry is not going to fix it anyhow.”

Be careful of words like “never” or “always” when talking about yourself or someone else. These words are most often inaccurate and may alienate and/or humiliate people who might otherwise be willing to work with you on a solution.

Remind yourself that getting angry is not going to fix anything, that it will not make you feel better and can actually make you feel worse.

Logic defeats anger, because anger, even when it is justified, can quickly become irrational. Remind yourself that the world is “not out to get you,” you are just experiencing some of the rough spots of daily life. Do this each time you feel anger getting the best of you.

Angry people tend to demand things: fairness, appreciation, agreement, willingness to do things their way. Everyone wants these things, and we are all hurt and disappointed when we do not get them, but angry people demand them. As part of their cognitive restructuring, angry people need to become aware of their demanding nature and translate their expectations into desires. In other words, saying, “I would like” something is healthier than saying, “I demand” or “I must have” something.

3. Problem Solving
Sometimes, our anger and frustrations are caused by very real and inescapable problems in our lives. Not all anger is misplaced, and often it is a healthy, natural response to these
difficulties. There is also a cultural belief that every problem has a solution, and it adds to our frustration when we find that this is not always the case. The best attitude to bring to such a situation is not to focus on finding the solution, but rather on how you handle and face the problem.

Make a plan, and check your progress along the way. Resolve to give it your best, but also do not to punish yourself if an answer does not come right away. If you can approach it with your best intentions and efforts and make a serious attempt to face it head-on, you will be less likely to lose patience and fall into all-or-nothing thinking, even if the problem does not get solved right away.

4. Better Communication
Angry people tend to jump to, and act on conclusions, and some of those conclusions can be very inaccurate. The first thing to do if you are in a heated discussion is slow down and think through your responses. Do not say the first thing that comes into your head, but slow down and think carefully about what you want to say. At the same time, listen carefully to what the other person is saying and take your time before answering.

It is natural to get defensive when you are criticized or are not having your needs met, but do not fight back. It may take a lot of patient questioning on your part, and it may require some breathing space, but do not let a discussion spin out of control. Keeping your cool can keep the situation from becoming a disastrous one.
5. Using Humor
“Silly humour” can help defuse rage in a number of ways. For one thing, it can help you get a more balanced perspective. When you get angry and call someone a name or refer to them in some imaginative phrase, stop and picture what that word would literally look like. If you think of someone as a “dirt bag,” picture a large bag full of dirt sitting in their place. Do this whenever a name comes into your head about another person. If you can, draw a picture of what the actual thing might look like. This will take a lot of the edge off your fury; and humour can always be relied on to help ease a tense situation.

6. Changing Your Environment
Sometimes it is our immediate surroundings that give us cause for irritation and fury. Problems and responsibilities can weigh on you and make you feel angry at the “trap” you seem to have fallen into and all the people and things that form that trap.

Give yourself a break. Make sure you have some “personal time” scheduled for times of the day that you know are particularly stressful. If you have had to make a difficult and stressful phone call, take a 15-minute break when the call is over. Hopefully this will help the stress from the phone call not carry over as anger to other people or activities.

(Adapted from: Strategies To Keep Anger At Bay. American Psychological Association)
**Assertive Versus Unassertive/Aggressive Behaviour**

Many people are concerned that if they assert themselves others will think of their behavior as aggressive. But there is a difference between being assertive and aggressive.

Assertive people state their opinions, while still being respectful of others. Aggressive people attack or ignore others' opinions in favor of their own. Passive people do not state their opinions at all.

The chart below gives some examples of the differences between passive, aggressive, and assertive behavior.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Passive Behaviours</th>
<th>Aggressive Behaviours</th>
<th>Assertive Behaviours</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Afraid to speak up</td>
<td>Interrupts and 'talks over' others</td>
<td>Speaks Openly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaks Softly</td>
<td>Speaks loudly</td>
<td>Speaks in a conversational tone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoids looking at people</td>
<td>Glares and stares at others</td>
<td>Makes good eye contact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shows little or no expression</td>
<td>Intimidates others with expressions</td>
<td>Shows expressions that match the message</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slouches and withdraws</td>
<td>Stands rigidly, crosses arms, invades others' personal space</td>
<td>Relaxes and adopts an open posture and expressions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isolates self from groups</td>
<td>Controls groups</td>
<td>Participates in groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passive Behaviours</td>
<td>Aggressive Behaviours</td>
<td>Assertive Behaviours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------</td>
<td>----------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Values self less than others</td>
<td>Values self more than others</td>
<td>Values self equal to others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hurts self to avoid hurting others</td>
<td>Hurts others to avoid being hurt</td>
<td>Tries to hurt no one, including self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does not reach goals and may not have goals</td>
<td>Reaches goals, but hurts others in the process</td>
<td>Usually reaches goals without alienating others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You're okay, I'm not</td>
<td>I'm okay, you're not</td>
<td>I'm okay, you're okay</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Do your behaviours fit into the passive or the aggressive column more than the assertive? If so, it may be time to take a look at your behaviours and your levels of assertiveness.

(Source: http://www.mtscil.org/skills/assert-3.html)
Section 4: Self-Advocacy Skills
Cynthia Shutsa
Problem-Solving & Decision-Making Skills

One of the exciting parts of life is the number of choices we have every day. Some decisions are simple, like deciding what to eat for dinner or what shirt to wear. But some choices are more challenging, and take careful thought and consideration.

When you have to make harder decisions, it can be very difficult to decide on the best choice, and you may be plagued by indecision. You may be forced to choose between two equally good options, or you may have to pick between two choices that both have drawbacks. You may waver back and forth between different alternatives and may seem paralyzed to make the decision. This is a very normal reaction to tough choices in our lives, and we all, at times, experience a sense of being unable to decide on some option.

There is a technique that many people find useful when they are trying to make a difficult decision or solve a problem that seems unsolvable. The technique uses a series of steps that you can go through on your own when you have trouble making a decision, or have a problem that needs to be solved. The technique may not work perfectly for all difficulties, but it may help with many of the problems you are confronted with in your life.
**Step 1: Problem Overview**
Recognize that there is a problem, and that you think that solving it is worthwhile. *It is important that you approach the decision-making process with a positive attitude and view the situation as an opportunity or challenge.*

**Write down your problem and a statement about why it is worthwhile.**

Example: I have an arrest under the provincial Mental Health Act, which I know will show up on my police records check, and may be an obstacle to volunteering. It is worthwhile to solve this problem because I have a lot to offer others and want to help people.

**Step 2: Define the Problem**
Before you start to tackle the problem, it is important to clearly understand the difficulty and why you are unhappy with the current situation. Really think about and get information about the problem, and make sure that the problem you are trying to solve is the "real" problem. Sometimes people find a different problem than the one that is really distressing them, and focus on it, since it is easier than dealing with the real problem.

In this step, think about the difficulty you are having, try to understand it, and think about why it is distressing.

**Write down what your current situation is like and how this is different from what you want it to be.**

**Write down what your goals are.**
Pick the most important goals and differences to focus on first. Remember you are only one person, so deal with one issue at a time!

**Step 3: Develop Alternative Solutions (Brainstorming)**
In this stage, ask yourself, "What have I done in this situation in the past, and how well has that worked?" If you find that what you have done in the past has not been as effective as you would like, it can help if you come up with some other solutions that may work better. Even if your behaviour in the past has worked like you wanted it to, you should think of other possible solutions, because you may come up with an even better idea.

*Write down as many possible solutions as you can think of. Ask others for their ideas as well.*

**Step 4: Decision Making**
Now you are ready to narrow down some of the options that you generated in Step 3.

Examine each option, think about how realistic each one is, how likely you would be to try that option, and the possible drawbacks of each. For example, if your solution costs a lot of money, or requires many hours of effort every day, it may be too difficult to do.

You should also consider the possibility of each option in terms of your being able to achieve the goals that you want.

As you start to narrow down your choices, remember that no solution is perfect and all may have drawbacks. You can always
try another solution if one does not work the way you want it to work.

**Step 5: Try Your Solution and See if it Works**
Once you have examined all your options and decided on one that seems to meet your goals and minimize your costs (for example, time or money), it is time to test it out.

Things to remember when trying your solution:

- Give it your best effort – the solution will not work if you do not give it your all!
- Continue to examine the solution you picked, and how well it is "solving" your problem
- If the solution is too hard to implement or is just not working, change it or try one of the other options from Step 3.

Trying to solve problems is never easy, and you may have to try several solutions before one works. Do not give up hope, because with persistence and your best effort, many difficult decisions and problems can be made better! Remember to try to find ways to make the situation more manageable. Take all the time you need, and take small steps.

(Adapted from: Positive Coping Skills Toolbox, VA Mental Illness Research, Education, and Clinical Centers)
Effective Complaining Skills

Why is the right to complain important?

☐ To stop injustice
☐ To fix mistakes
☐ To change things for the better
☐ To empower
☐ To ensure fair treatment for all
☐ To get answers
☐ To get change both individually and systemically (laws, policy)
☐ To get results
☐ To ensure democracy
☐ To educate / inform
☐ Decrease frustration / stress
☐ To address injustice(s)
☐ Other: __________

Which of these reasons apply to your own situation?

What are the benefits of Complaining?

☐ Sense of accomplishment
☐ Get some money
☐ Setting procedure (improve the system)
☐ Lesson to those who abuse power
☐ Closure
☐ Public trust
☐ Self-worth
☐ Bring things to light
☐ Get what you want
☐ Have things the way you need
☐ Other: __________

Which of these reasons apply to your own situation?
What is most likely to work?

- Be calm, cool, and collected when expressing your complaint
- Be clear and concise when describing the problem
- Let your anger motivate and give you energy
- Treat people as you would like to be treated: with respect and courtesy
- Listen carefully to the other person
- Keep detailed records of who you talked to, their phone number, when you spoke to them and what they told you
- Ask questions – prepare a list of questions in advance if you can
- Find out about any relevant complaint and appeal process
- If you are not satisfied with a response, ask for a referral to someone at the next administrative level
- Put your complaint in writing and keep copies of all documentation
- Decide what you want and what you are willing to settle for
- Be flexible and open minded to find a win/win solution to the problem
- Call Ombudsman of Ontario if you have exhausted all statutory avenues of appeal
- Know the right contacts
- Have a plan of action
- Use of the media
• Start with the least intrusive measures
• Have the courage to act
• Stick with the issue and do not allow yourself to be side tracked
• Be patient
• Keep your eye on the prize

**What is least likely to work?**

• Being unclear or confused about your complaint
• Having no documentation or evidence
• Making unreasonable demands
• Not listening
• Swearing, shouting, generally rude, insulting and offensive behaviour
• Making conclusions without knowing all the facts
• Inconsistency
• Doing nothing
• Not having facts/evidence
• Not knowing your rights
What is your Complaining Style?

Describe the type of person who may be characterized as a Chronic Complainer, an Effective Complainer and a Why Bother Complainer, adding to some of the ideas below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chronic Complainer</th>
<th>Effective Complainer</th>
<th>Why Bother?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Whiner</td>
<td>• Realistic</td>
<td>• Grin and bear it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• No Solutions</td>
<td>• Reasonable</td>
<td>• Apathetic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Blame others</td>
<td>• Responsible</td>
<td>• Overly optimistic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Negative – dislike/anger</td>
<td>• Non-blaming</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Where do you fit? Mark on the line or continuum the place that seems most familiar to you.

Think of a complaint you have had in the past: would you have been more successful if you had moved along the continuum one way or another?

When making a complaint, which of the three styles are most likely to get you what you want, and why?

Over the next week when you complain about something, do not come from your old familiar place – move along the continuum to the place where you can be most effective.
Remember, where you are on the continuum can change depending on your environment or situation. You may be a Chronic Complainer at home with your family, but take a Why Bother position when at work/school.

(Adapted from: How to Complain Effectively, OBUDSMAN ONTARIO, 2003)
“SMART” Complaining Checklist

Before you share your complaint, or following a failed complaint, review the following checklist as a guide:

S – Specific/Support

☐ Are you being specific when you explain your complaint?
☐ Can you speak with a specific person who can change policy or decisions?
☐ Do you have support? Have you asked friends, family or others for help or advice?
☐ Is there a community group that could give you support?
☐ Do you have facts and documents to support you?

M – Measurable

☐ Is there a way to measure the result of your problem?
  Has it cost you money?
☐ What will fix your complaint?
☐ Would you be willing to compromise? By how much?

A – Achievable/Anger

☐ Can you achieve your goal? Did you give clear, factual evidence?
☐ Are you using your anger positively: to energize and motivate you?
☐ Are you negatively expressing your anger: by shouting, threatening, etc.?

R – Respectful/Reasonable

☐ Are you being respectful and courteous?
☐ Are you treating others, as you would like to be treated?
☐ Are your expectations reasonable?

T – Tracking

• Are you tracking your progress by keeping a detailed record of all calls, letters, responses and any other relevant items?
How NOT to complain

1. Complain all the time. Constant complaining is just whining, and makes you seem like a curmudgeon.

2. Complain without checking the facts. Research the issues before you start to complain.

3. Be non-specific. I tell my students "Don't tell me that this assignment sucks, tell me why it sucks."

4. Complain to the wrong person. If you are not complaining to someone who can correct the problem, the chances of correcting the problem are slim.

5. Make the complaint a personal attack. Use "I" messages to avoid criticizing directly.

6. Have no suggestions as to how to fix the issue. If you are not part of the solution, you are part of the problem.

7. Let the issue escalate. If you are proactive, maybe the problem can be fixed more easily if it is noticed quickly.
Negotiation Skills

There are five basic principles you can use in negotiating:

1. Be hard on the problem and soft on the person
2. Focus on needs, not positions
3. Emphasize common ground
4. Be inventive about options
5. Make clear agreements

If you can, prepare in advance. Consider your needs, and the other person's needs. Think about possible solutions that would get more of what you both want. Be clear that your job is to move the negotiation forward by doing some of the following:

Reframe
- Ask a question to reframe (ask the question in a different way), for example, "If we succeed in resolving this problem, what differences would you notice?"
- Request checking of understanding. For example, "Can you please tell me what you heard me say?"
- Re-interpret an attack on the person as an attack on the issue.
- Request something she/he said to be re-stated more positively, or as an "I" message.

Respond instead of Reacting
- Manage your emotions, and try to stay calm. Take time out, if you need it.
• Let some accusations, attacks, threats or ultimatums pass.
• Make it possible for the other person to back down without feeling humiliated (for example, by identifying changed circumstances which could justify a changed position on the issue.)

Re-focus on the Issue
Here are some ideas to maintain the relationship and try to resolve the issue.

• Find out what is fair for both sides.
• Summarize the progress you have made toward solving the problem.
• Review common ground and agreement so far.
• Focus on being partners solving the problem, not on being opponents.
• Divide the issue into parts.
• Address a less difficult aspect when stuck. Invite trading ("If you will, then I will").
• Explore the best and worst alternatives to negotiating an acceptable agreement between you.

Identify Unfair Tactics
Be aware that some people will use unfair tactics, like deceiving you, discounting what you say, or distracting you. You need to be aware of what the other person is doing and take steps to deal with it. Here are some other strategies:
• Name the other person’s behaviour as a tactic
• Address the person’s motive for using the tactic
• Have a break
• Change locations or seating arrangements
• Go into smaller groups or meet privately
• Call for a meeting to end now and start again later, giving people a chance for reflection and regrouping
Conflict Management

Conflict means a disagreement or opposing interests or ideas between people. Every conflict is a struggle to meet people’s goals or needs. Conflict can occur when:

- There are differences about values or beliefs.
  Resources or rewards are scarce
- People are under a great deal of stress, or they face an uncertain environment
- There is a breakdown in communication (one of the most common cause of conflict)

Conflict management is a positive process where people work to resolve issues. Conflict is a normal part of life because people have different and opposing goals.

Conflict should not be judged as "good" or "bad," but should be looked at from a wider perspective that looks at the individual and society.

Conflict can be constructive or destructive— it can liven up a disagreement or be a deadly quarrel. The Chinese pictogram for conflict has two parts, one meaning “danger,” and the other meaning “opportunity”.

Conflict resolution is not just about avoiding danger, or fixing things up— it is about finding and making the best of the opportunity that is built into the conflict.
Conflict management has a set of steps that work on the conflict in an attempt to settle it. Conflict involves not just the real situation, but also how people understand and feel about it.

You can develop the skills and attitudes that are needed to deal with conflicts, even difficult ones.
Eight Steps to Manage Conflict

1. Identify the positions of each side of the people in conflict. Choose an appropriate time and place. Never berate a person — this can make the situation worse. Remain focused on the problem.

2. Learn more about the true needs and desires behind each side or person. Identify the conflict, as you understand it. Tell your side of the story without emotion. Describe what, not why, happened.

3. Listen fully to the other person’s ideas and feelings about the conflict. Ask questions to get more information and to make sure a point is clear.

4. Together, brainstorm some possible solutions to resolve the situation.

5. Discuss how each solution would affect each side or person, and figure out possible compromises.

6. Agree on a WIN/WIN solution (see next page), both sides/people get what they want.

7. Try the solution.

8. Meet again to re-evaluate the solution, if the conflict is still there.
Approaches of Conflict Management

1. Win/Lose
In this style, only one person or side gets what they want, so power is the key thing. It can be physical power, the power of an authority, or mental power. Sometimes this style is the only choice if there are scarce resources. It can also be the only choice if the other side or person wants to defeat you and you have to fight back.

Think of a time you have been involved in a Win/Lose Situation. How did you feel about the outcome?

2. Lose /Lose
In the Lose/Lose style, nobody wins. An example is family members in a conflict deciding never to talk to each other again.

Can you think of another example of a Lose/Lose situation?

3. Compromise
In this style, both people/sides get some of what they want, but they also lose out on getting something they really want or need. Some compromises can work out for both sides, like agreeing with a seller on a “middle” price for something you want to buy. The problem with compromises is that there are many bad ones, where both sides lose.

Share an example of a good compromise and an example of a time when a compromise was bad.
How could this have been different?

Write down your problem and a statement about why it is worthwhile.

4. Win/Win
This can be a style that results in the least amount of conflict, because both sides work together to find a solution to get what they want. It is also called collaboration, because people do not try to win at the cost of the other person losing. Win/Win goes beyond compromising and lets both people or sides reach their goals or needs. Working together means, you can be creative in finding the best solution for a conflict or problem.
Walk a Mile in Their Shoes

Sometimes it can be helpful to explore the other person’s interests and think about what you would do in their situation. This can be helpful because you may find out that your interests, wants or needs are not that different from the other person’s. You may also discover you have some interests in common, and that there may not be a conflict at all.

There is a story about two people in a kitchen. There is only one orange left and both of them wanted it. After arguing, they decided to stop and listen to each other’s point of view. They discovered that their needs are complimentary: one person just wanted the orange peel to use for baking, and the other person wanted the inside of the orange to eat. The conflict ended and both people got what they wanted.

Even if your needs and the needs of the other person as not as easily met as with the orange, understanding the others perspective may help in many ways; you may be able to think of a wider variety of situations and be able to show true compassion towards the other person. Kindness and understanding always leads to the best outcomes.
Section 5:
Communication
**COM:MU:NI:CA:TION** noun ˈkoˌmyōnəˈkāSH(ə)n/

: The imparting or interchange of thoughts, opinions, or information by speech, writing, or signs
: The successful conveying or sharing of ideas and feelings
(Source: Random House Dictionary, 2009)

**Non-verbal communication** is the act of saying what is on your mind without speaking words. Examples of this include facial gestures (smiling, frowning), body language (arms crossed, giving someone the "finger", legs shaking resembling nervousness, sitting upright giving someone their full attention), and the impression you give to others with your appearance (dress, body image, body odor).

Also, the tone of your voice can be expressed non-verbally. For instance, if you are saying one thing, but your tone of voice is saying another, then that reflects how you are truly feeling without speaking a word about it (yelling and crying while saying you’re okay).

**Verbal communication** is the act of saying what is on your mind with words. This form of communication is often taken for granted. Such as saying regretful things and opening your mouth before thinking about what you are saying.

(Source: http://www.relationship-withself.com/definitionofcommunication.html)
1. **Name Calling, Ridiculing, Shaming**
   “Stupid!”
   “That was a dumb thing to do!”
   “How could you?”
   Such messages can have a devastating effect on the other person's self-image. They may lead to similar responses back and decrease the likelihood of others being willing to help you get what you need. Instead of the person being able to clearly and realistically look at your situation, they will instead become defensive and unwilling to listen to your concerns.

2. **Judging, Criticizing, Disagreeing, Blaming**
   “You are not thinking straight!”
   “You are acting foolishly!”
   This kind of message makes the person feel bad, incompetent, or inadequate. S/he may respond defensively – after all, no one likes to be wrong! Evaluation such as this cuts off communication.

3. **Warning, Admonishing, Threatening**
   “You better...”
   “If you don't, then...”
These kinds of responses bring in the threat power. They produce resentment, anger, resistance and rebellion.

They invite the person to do exactly what s/he is being warned not to do.

4. **Moralizing, Preaching, Obliging**
   “You should...”
   “You ought...”
   “It is your duty...”
   This makes the person feel guilty and inadequate. The person may really dig in and prefer to not help you solve your problem. When a person is feeling like they are being told what to do or how to do their job, they are less likely to want to help.

5. **Ordering, Directing, Commanding**
   “You must...”
   “You have to...”
   “You will...”
   In addition to provoking active resistance and rebellion, these responses may frighten the person. They may also produce resentment; no one likes to be ordered around.

6. **Persuading with logic, Arguing, Instructing, Lecturing**
   “Yes, but...”
   “Do you realize...”

75
“This is not right...”
“The facts are...”
Responses like this imply that you think you are superior to the person. They will bring forth defensiveness and counter-arguments and they may cause the person to defend his/her position more strongly. Remember, having logic on your side does not always bring forth compliance or agreement. Nor does your proving something right make it right for the other person.

7. **Interrupting, Analyzing, Diagnosing**
   “What you need is...”
   “What's wrong with you is...”
   “You don’t really mean that.”
To tell someone what their “real” feelings or motivations are is threatening if you are right, leaving them to feel exposed and naked. If you are wrong, it is unfair, resulting in resistance and anger from the other person. Again, this response implies you think you are superior.

8. **Probing, Questioning, Interrogating**
Of course when you are advocating for yourself, it is important to ask questions. However, if you ask too many questions at a time, without allowing the other person time to respond, it can lead to frustration and resistance. These responses convey a lack of trust on your part.
9. Advising, Giving Suggestions or Solution
   “What I would do is...”
   “Why don’t you...”
   “Let me suggest...”
   It is important to let the other person know what you need from them and hope to gain from the exchange. However, when you give advice, you are implying that you think you are superior to the person on the receiving end.

10. Withdrawing, Distracting, Humouring, Diverting
    “That reminds me...”
    “By the way, did you hear the one about...?”
   This kind of response communicates that you are not interested in what the other person has to say and that you are not taking the meeting seriously.

11. Praising, Agreeing, Evaluating, Approving
    “You’ve done the right thing!”
    “What a great job!”
    Although it is important to show appreciation when someone is able to help you get what you need, you do not want to sound patronizing or condescending.

12. Reassuring, Sympathizing, Consoling, Supporting
    “It's not so bad.”
    “Don’t worry.”
    “That's too bad.”
While these responses may be very well intended, the person will probably feel that you do not understand them. Also, in terms of advocacy situations, it is not your job to console the other person; it is your job to get the answers you need.

Which blocks do you think you use the most?
With whom did you use the blocks most?
What subjects or situations usually trigger the block?

When you start to block, you were feeling: (Check all that apply)

- Bored
- Frustrated
- Pre-occupied
- Jealous
- Rushed
- Down
- Excited
- Hurt
- Attached
- Anxious
- Criticized
- Irritated
- Tired
- Other: __________
Poor Listening

For those who choose to take the road most travelled, here are a few thoughts on how to ensure poor advocacy relationships.

Just Keep Talking
Look at it this way--the more you talk, the less time others get to talk. This way, you completely avoid the issue of listening altogether. Why risk having to pretend you are listening when you have the opportunity to completely prevent others from talking?

There is also a particularly useful secondary effect of this recommendation. The more often you do this, the less often others want to be around you. Voila! You have also reduced the frequency of situations where you might be forced to listen.

If you take only one useful tip away from this article, this one is it: Flapping your gums will save your ears.

When you are not talking, think about what you are going to say next
On occasion, even the best talker among us either runs out of things to say or is rudely interrupted. When this happens, be prepared to jump right in to step 2. As soon as your mouth stops moving start thinking about how to resume talking. It is that simple.

You may want to consider bobbing your head up and down a few times while you are thinking. If you are not careful, the speaker will notice that you are not listening, and will ask you a
question for which you are unprepared. Then you will be stuck stammering some sort of answer.

**Interrupt Frequently**
Once you have figured out what you want to say next, then you are ready for step 3, interruption. Interruption takes two major forms: 1) finishing the speaker's sentence and 2) just doing it. Finishing the speaker's sentence is particularly effective since it brings closure to their thought and demonstrates that you understand it completely.

Just starting to talk is usually best done when the speaker is forced to take a breath. This way, you are not both talking at the same time, which becomes a nasty battle of the talking wills. Remember, others want to talk as much as you do. If you give them a chance, they will just keep talking forever.

**Look Away**
Whether you are talking or not, you always have one tool at your disposal, avoiding eye contact. This prevents the speaker from getting non-verbal feedback indicating that you are not listening. Some like to just stare, unfocused into space. Some poor listeners prefer to silently hunt the room for more important or attractive people. There is always someone better to talk to. If you must look at the speaker, focus on some odd aspect of their appearance, like a piece of spinach between their teeth.
Never, ever, ask clarifying questions
Finally, when you do get the chance to talk, do not ask questions that help clarify the comments of other speakers. Doing so would require that you listened to what was said in the first place. It also seals the transfer of information by confirming what you heard. Additionally, questions invite others to talk, ensuring that you are spending too much time listening.

(Adapted from: Leading Geeks, Paul Glenn - Jossey Bass Pfeiffer, 2002)
Be an Active Listener!

Listening is one of the most important skills you can have. How well you listen has a major impact on the quality of your relationships with others.

For instance:
We listen to obtain information.
We listen to understand.
We listen for enjoyment.
We listen to learn.

The way to improve your listening skills is to practice "active listening." This is where you make a conscious effort to hear not only the words that another person is saying but, more importantly, try to understand the complete message being sent; *listening is more than just hearing*.

There are five key elements of active listening. They all help you ensure that you hear the other person, and that the other person knows you are hearing what they say.

**Pay Attention**
Give the speaker your undivided attention, and acknowledge the message. Recognize that non-verbal communication also "speaks" loudly.

- Look at the speaker directly.
- Put aside distracting thoughts.
- Don't mentally prepare a rebuttal!
• Avoid being distracted by environmental factors. For example, side conversations.
• "Listen" to the speaker's body language.

Show That You're Listening
Use your own body language and gestures to convey your attention.

• Nod occasionally.
• Smile and use other facial expressions.
• Note your posture and make sure it is open and inviting.
• Encourage the speaker to continue with small verbal comments like “Yes”, and “Uh huh”.

Provide Feedback
Our personal filters, assumptions, judgments, and beliefs can distort what we hear. As a listener, your role is to understand what is being said. This may require you to reflect what is being said and ask questions.

• Reflect what has been said by leading your comments with "What I’m hearing is..." or "Sounds like you are saying..."
• Ask questions to clarify certain points - "What do you mean when you say...?" "Is this what you mean?"
• Summarize the speaker's comments periodically.
Defer Judgment
Interrupting is a waste of time. It frustrates the speaker and limits full understanding of the message.

- Allow the speaker to finish each point before asking questions.
- Don’t interrupt with counter arguments.

Respond Appropriately
Active listening is a model for respect and understanding. You are gaining information and perspective. You add nothing by attacking the speaker or otherwise putting him or her down.

- Be candid, open, and honest in your response.
- Assert your opinions respectfully.
- Treat the other person in a way that you think he or she would want to be treated.

Good listening helps build relationships, solve problems, and build self-esteem in others. We can be good listeners if we open our hearts and minds to the messages of others, ask questions, focus on what they are saying, and treat them with respect. Although good listening is sometimes difficult, we will benefit not only in our relationships with others, but will learn new ideas and have an opportunity to share in the thoughts of others.

(Adapted from: Active Listening: Improve your Active Listening Skills, James Manktelow & Amy Carlson)
Section 6: 
Knowing Your Rights
We all have Rights

Most modern democratic countries have statements of the rights and responsibilities of its citizens. The United Nations organization has a Universal Declaration of Human Rights that it expects all participating countries to follow. To read more about the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, please visit http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/.

The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms

In Canada, this document guarantees personal human rights and freedoms. Everyone has the following fundamental freedoms:

- Freedom of conscience and religion
- Freedom of thought, belief, opinion and expression, including freedom of the press and other communication media
- Freedom of peaceful assembly
- Freedom of association
- Freedom of discrimination

The Charter covers many areas, such as:

- Employment (example: Employment Insurance)
- Income: includes the Canada Pension Plan (CPP), and Canada Pension Plan Disability
- Benefits (CPP-D)
- Health: includes regulations and funding for the provinces
- Consumer rights and protections
- Privacy rights
**Provincial Rights in Canada**

Some provinces have legislation that delves more deeply than the Canadian Charter of Right and Freedoms. For example, the Ontario Human Rights Code explores concerns including Employment, Disability and Family Law, with greatly clarity. These provincial legislations may more specifically relate to your circumstances. Be sure to research all potential areas that may affect your case.

**What are Your Rights?**
There are two important things you should know:
- What your rights are
- Which resources are available to assist you if your rights are violated

**Who or what decides these definitions?**
- The courts, based on laws and customs.
- Parliament, based on current beliefs.
- Local councils.

**What can you do to make things work for you?**
- Know about the law.
- Know about your rights.

**What is fair?**
There can be a difference between the law, and what you think may or may not be fair. But remember that life is not always fair. You can still work to get justice for yourself, or find the best solution possible for you.
Personal Bill of Rights

1. I have the right to ask for what I want.
2. I have the right to say no to requests or demands I cannot meet.
3. I have the right to express all of my feelings, positive or negative.
4. I have the right to change my mind.
5. I have the right to make mistakes and not have to be perfect.
6. I have the right to say no to anything when I feel I am not ready, it is unsafe, or it violates my values.
7. I have the right to determine my own priorities.
8. I have the right not to be responsible for others’ behaviours, actions, feelings, or problems.
9. I have the right to expect honesty from others.
10. I have the right to be angry with someone I love.
11. I have the right to be uniquely myself.
12. I have the right to feel scared and say "I'm scared."
13. I have the right to say "I don't know."
14. I have the right not to give excuses or reasons for my behaviour.
15. I have the right to make decisions based on my feelings.
16. I have the right to my own needs for personal space and time.
17. I have the right to be playful and frivolous.
18. I have the right to be healthier than those around me.
19. I have the right to be in a non-abusive environment.
20. I have the right to make friends and be comfortable around people.
21. I have the right to change and grow.
22. I have the right to have my needs and wants respected by others.
23. I have the right to be treated with dignity and respect.
24. I have the right to be happy.

(Source: The Anxiety and Phobia Workbook by Edmund J. Bourne)
Research Skills

There are so many reasons and issues that would create the need for a person to advocate for themselves, so many reasons that no one place can list all of them. The best way to know your rights is to do your research.

- List key words to help you look up information about the topic.
- Go to an encyclopaedia, or other reference source, to get an overview of the topic.
- Brainstorm questions about the topic.
- Group questions under similar headings.
- Make a list of possible sources that can answer your questions. This can include local legal services, advocacy supports or organizations.
- Find the sources in the library, on the computer, etc.
- Know that in Canada, most Codes, Acts, Laws, by-laws, and more are available free on the internet.
Practical Self Advocacy Skills

Advocacy on the Telephone
Most of us know how to use a telephone, but we can learn to use it more effectively as a tool for getting what we want. Many people – understandably – lose patience when dealing with large bureaucracies such as insurance companies or government agencies: more and more, callers must navigate automated menus before reaching a live person. Some people have feelings of fear or anxiety when making phone calls. However, we all can work to improve our telephone skills.

Phone Manners

Resolving a problem by phone is often the quickest and most straightforward way to resolve a problem. However, the process still takes some time and can cause frustration. If you are able to keep in control and avoid getting angry with delays and frustrations, then you will be a much more effective advocate for yourself. Eventually, you will make it past the pre-recorded messages and press the right keys to get to the correct department. When you finally do reach a live voice, it may be a lower-level employee who may not have the authority to resolve your request.

No matter how frustrated or upset you feel, refrain from screaming at the person on the other end of the line. Your ability to handle your anger may have an impact on how well (or poorly) the organization resolves your problem. The person will probably be able to understand your situation more easily if
they can understand what you are saying and be more willing to help you get what you need.

**Plan the call.** Always jot down key objectives before making a call. What are you trying to accomplish? What outcomes are you expecting? How will you deal with objections? By setting an agenda, you are showing respect to the person you are calling and acknowledging his or her busy schedule.

**Know who you are calling.** Getting a person's name right and understand the person's position in the organization is critical. This way you can have a better idea of what they may be able to do for you, and can later thank or make complaints about the individual.

**Be polite.** This should be obvious, but being polite does not just mean treating the person you are calling with respect. This should extend to the person answering the phone or to the message that you leave on voice mail. Many business people rely on voice mail to screen calls, and your approach can make the difference as to whether or not they return your call. Be careful to keep your tone of voice modulated and never indicate impatience at having to leave a message. If the technology allows, review your message before hitting "send." Many systems allow for you to erase and re-record your message.

**Introduce yourself.** Make sure that your party knows who you are and the nature of your call. This applies whether you reach the person's voice mail or connect in person. Speak clearly and slowly.

**Get to the point.** Once you are successful in reaching your party and have introduced yourself, get to the point. Let the
person know why you are calling and use your notes to keep your agenda clear.

**Listen.** Allow the person you are calling to ask questions and convey his or her point of view. Do not interrupt, and answer questions honestly and directly. Even if you are met with objections, allow the individual to finish before jumping in with your defense. Be courteous and check your attitude frequently. Indicate that you are listening by saying, "I see," "I understand," or simply, "Yes." However, be sure to refrain from other comments until the individual is finished.

**Ask open-ended questions.** Encourage a free flow of dialogue by asking questions that require the person to respond fully. You can learn a lot from this type of exchange and this often leads to further discussion.

**Be patient.** Never try to rush a call, and allow the individual to fully express his or her opinions, reactions, etc.

**Know when to end the call.** There is generally a point at which it becomes clear that the call should be concluded, and trying to extend the call to reach additional objectives can be counterproductive. Sometimes the person you have called may seem to want to extend the conversation, and you will need to politely conclude the conversation without offending the individual. Use positive statements such as "I know you are busy, and want to thank you for your time," to politely signal the end of the conversation.

(Adapted from: Self-Advocacy. Self Help Clearinghouse)
Advocacy in Writing
Being able to write a short, direct, and assertive letter can aid your advocacy efforts. Writing letters is a skill to be learned, and fortunately it is easier than almost any other writing style. Keep in mind the shorter the letter, the better!

Format of a business letter or email:
Although there are many variations in the format used for business letters, the sample on the next page provides a good model to follow.

Make sure you letter includes:
• Your return address or email
• The Date
• The other persons address or email
• Greeting Signature, similar to that of the sample letter that follows

The content of the letter
The sample letter also provides an idea of what to include in your letter or email. When you write, it is recommended that you:

• Open by explaining why you are writing
• Include or attach copies of relevant documents, or offer to provide necessary documentation if necessary.
• Explain the reason why you are asking for action by the recipient. If the action is urgent, explain why.
• If you are considering legal action or formal complaint, note that you are considering it. However, reserve this
tactic for situations in which you feel that you have a valid case and could follow through; otherwise, the other party could call your bluff.

- In the closing paragraph, give a time by which you expect the recipient to respond or take action. This should be a reasonable amount of time in relation to the urgency of the situation.
- In the closing paragraph, thank the recipient, or if the recipient has not proven helpful so far, express your hope that they will resolve the matter as soon as possible.

(Adapted from: Self-Advocacy. Self Help Clearinghouse)

Sample Letter

Elizabeth Martin
127 Maple St. Apt. 105
Anytown, Prov. A1B 1A1
April 1, 20--
Mr. Edward Peters
Peters Property Management
13 Main St.
Anytown, Prov. A1B 1A1

Dear Mr. Peters:

I am a tenant in your building at 127 Maple Street. I am writing to request as a reasonable accommodation, that I be allowed to keep a service dog in my apartment. My hope is that as a caring
landlord you would provide this reasonable accommodation to a tenant with a disability.

I understand that the building has a 'no pets' policy; however, health care professionals have recommended that I use a service animal for emotional support. I would be happy to provide written documentation of my need and my provider's recommendations.

Please contact me within ten days to let me know whether my request has been granted, as I need to proceed with finding a suitable service dog. You may reach me by telephone at (555)555-2525. Thank you for your prompt consideration of my request.

Sincerely,
Elizabeth Martin

Advocacy in Person
For some forms of self-advocacy, such as participating in your own health care decisions, in-person advocacy is inevitable. Some advocates think that meeting face-to-face with the person you are trying to influence is the most effective way to advocate. By working to improve your in person advocacy skills, you can help overcome the anxiety that many people experience when preparing for a meeting.

Preparing for a Meeting
Preparing in advance of a meeting may help reduce anxiety, and preparation can help you to become a much more effective self-advocate.
Steps:

1. **Write down the appointment details** as soon as you have scheduled it and keep this information in convenient place. Include date, time, and location, name of contact person, directions and any other relevant information. Although this is simple step, it is extremely important.

2. **Ask for information that** will help you prepare when you are scheduling the meeting. Is there any type of documentation you will need to bring along? Do you need to meet certain qualifications in order to get what you are asking for? Make sure all parties clearly understand the purpose of the meeting.

3. **Find a friend to come with you.** Although it is helpful to have someone who knows something about advocacy, it is not necessary. Your friend can act as a support and also a witness to what happens in the meeting.

4. **Think about what could happen in the meeting.** Ask yourself the following questions:
   - What do I want to happen at the meeting?
   - What do I want to learn at the meeting?
   - What could happen as a result of the meeting?
By knowing these things, you can better think through your strategy.

5. **Prepare an agenda** for what you would like to say, what you would like to ask the other person, and how you would respond to the other party's suggestion of what they would like to happen. Bring a copy of this agenda with you, and if appropriate, copies for the other parties as well.

6. **Bring photocopies** of all relevant documents, including any laws or regulations that apply to your situation. Demonstrating that you know your rights makes it much more difficult for your rights to be ignored!

7. **Keep the appointment.** Remember that the person you are meeting with has other commitments. Not keeping appointments gives people a reason to focus their time to other people and work.

8. **Call in advance** to cancel or reschedule if you absolutely cannot make the appointment. Give as much notice as possible; you should not cancel the same day unless it is a sudden, unanticipated emergency.

(Adapted from: Self-Advocacy. Self Help Clearinghouse)
Holding a Successful Meeting
The most important first step of a successful meeting is to show up on time! Once you are there, you have many tactics you can use to improve your chances of a successful outcome. Although some of these skills require practice, learning them will help you be a much more effective self-advocate.

Body Language
In an ideal world, justice and fairness would govern everyone’s actions. However, in the real world, people will judge you for how you present yourself at a meeting, which can greatly influence the outcome. Using positive body language conveys confidence and assertiveness.

Here are some examples of positive body language:

- **Dress and groom yourself appropriately** for the meeting. Poor grooming or sloppy dress can leave a negative impression, regardless of anything else. If you dress nicely, people will treat you with more respect.
- **Do your best to maintain eye contact.** Although difficult if you are feeling shy or nervous, maintaining eye contact helps you maintain control over the meeting. You do not need to 'stare down' the other person, but do look the other person in the eye when they are talking.
- **Use good posture.** By sitting up straight in your chair, you show respect for the other person and convey confidence in what you are seeking.
- **Practice these skills.** Before an important meeting, you can practice your body language with a friend or in
front of a mirror. If you do not demonstrate positive body language naturally, you can improve with practice!

(Adapted from: Self-Advocacy. Self Help Clearinghouse)

Listening during a Meeting
When you are meeting with someone, active listening can mean the difference between being spoken to and 'spoken at'. Active listening means that you take steps to find out the information you need, rather than simply hearing the words.

Listening Tips

- **Clarify Language**— if the person uses jargon or abbreviations you do not understand be sure to ask what they mean.

  Example: “We don't usually hear about these types of situations until the DDM has contacted us” If you do not know what the DDM is, ask! If you try to find out after the meeting, you may miss important opportunities during the discussion.

- **Restate** a person's position to make sure that you both understand what the person is offering or requiring.

  Example: “So what you are saying is that I should contact the DDM to ask them to review my case before
we can proceed.”

- **Clarify Reactions** – ask questions if you do not understand a person's reaction to what you say. Someone may reply “I see”, but what they really mean “I see that you are being difficult.” When someone is being vague, do not guess, ask!

- Record what went on during the meeting and share your notes with all parties to make sure you clearly heard what was being said. Be sure to write down:
  - any promises that you or the other person made
  - any actions you must take
  - any explanations the person makes for granting or denying your requests
  - anything the person says in support of your position

You may also choose to use an audio recording device to keep an exact record of the meeting. Be sure to ask for permission before recording.
Overcoming Barriers

Why You May Not Want to Advocate for Yourself
There are many reasons why you may feel that you cannot advocate for yourself. Listed below are just a few reasons we tell ourselves why we cannot stand up for what we believe in, or change a situation that may be unfair. Unfairness may have a negative impact on us or on people we know, and may cause us to let others have power over us. You may feel that you cannot change things because:

- You do not have control over your life.
- It is too hard to change your situation. Nothing you do will make a difference.
- The 'System' is just too big and powerful.
- No one cares, or really understands you or your situation.
- You are caught in a situation not of your own making.
- You are being discriminated against because of your mental health issues.

What are some other reason's you may not want to advocate for yourself?

Limitations & Barriers
You may find both internal (personal) and external barriers when being a self-advocate, and are dealing with a problem or conflict. It can be very helpful to look at the barriers being faced in your circumstances.
Any of these barriers can stop you from moving forward. So, start from where you are and know that with time and help you can overcome any barrier, maybe by taking small steps. At the very least, you can present your case in the best way.

**External Barriers**
These barriers come from outside of us. They can include bureaucratic requirements like costs, or documents that are written in a way that are hard for you to easily understand.

**Internal (Personal) Barriers**
It is just as important to be aware of the barriers that are inside us. We can get stuck in fear; like fear of someone’s reprisal, fear of being embarrassed, or fear of not being heard. Sometime mood swings interfere with presenting yourself in the best way. Lack of trust or just thinking you are not up to the challenge may stop you from moving forward. Lack of support, or thinking you do not have enough knowledge about your rights, or about the best approach to take may get in your way. You may not be sure what questions to ask, or about having a good enough vocabulary or that you need better communication skills. These are all things you can learn to overcome.

**List some External Barriers you are facing.**

**List some Internal (Personal) Barriers you have.**

All of us face barrier from time to time, especially when it comes to self-advocacy. Most often, a barrier encouraged us to advocate in the first place. The following two articles will talk
about naming barriers we face and prioritizing our problems so that we may cope with them more effectively.

Prioritizing the barriers you face will help you in dealing with your advocacy issues. It will help you map out what the known and perceived outcomes may be; thereby giving you the information you need to be successful.

Example: You were fired from your job for mental health reasons.
- Look into financial assistance
- Make sure you can meet the basic needs for you and your family
- Find out what laws, acts or codes relate to your situation
- Do you have supports to help you?
- Do you need legal representation?

Preparing for these things will help make the situation easier to cope with. The more information you receive, the less anxiety.

**Facing the Barriers**
A barrier is something that stops you from doing what it is you want to do. People encounter barriers in every aspect of their daily lives. Some problems can be overcome with patience and time, while others are much larger and require time, effort (be it monetary, physical or emotional), and a great deal of planning.
Often it is helpful to identify the barriers that you are facing then create a plan to help break down those barriers. Sometimes the barriers or issues that you face are easily identified, while others are easily overlooked. Let us look at the barriers that you may be facing and how we may overcome them.

**Naming the Barriers**
On the next page is a list of possible barriers that you may face in any given situation. It may not include all barriers but it gives a starting point in which to be completely honest and open about what those barriers are and what we may be actually facing. Place a check by each of the issues that may be a barrier to reaching your advocacy goals. Some individuals may check off every item, and some only a few. Feel free to write down any others that come to mind.

Following the checklist are questions that may help to access where you are in your life. It will help you to see what direction it is that you need to go in to resolve those barriers. Keep this checklist and use it later as a guide or gauge to see how far you have come.
Barriers you may be facing (Check all that apply)

- lack of formal education
- problems getting a job
- problems holding a job
- budgeting problems
- lack of financial resources
- domestic violence (between partners/family members)
- child support not getting collected
- child care problems
- divorce/custody case
- lack of emotional support
- language barrier
- eviction or threat of eviction
- homelessness
- utility shut off or threat of utility shutoff
- trouble paying bills or student loans/being harassed by creditors
- medical crisis of self or family member
- fear of losing Medicaid/medical insurance
- hard to handle emergencies all alone
- other


Not All Problems are Created Equal

Take a look at the list of barriers that you have just filled out. Looking at this list, we can see items that can wait, and items that need to change right away. There also may be barriers that
can turn into opportunities. Prioritizing your barriers means that you can decide what has the most importance in your life right now and what can wait.

By knowing what barriers are the most important and by careful planning we will be able to concentrate on those that need immediate attention. By working on those of top priority, you could inevitably end up working on or even solving other issues along the way.

**Top Priority Problems**
Barriers that affect your life in an immediate and life threatening way are the top priority. Each individual will consider top priorities differently.

Some examples may include:
- threat of eviction
- threat of losing utilities
- violence or abuse
- potential loss of child or custody of child to a dangerous ex
- homelessness
- a mental or medical crisis
- suicidal feelings
- If more than one of these is your top priority, still rank them in order of importance. This will help you decide which barrier to work on first.
Breathing Room Problems
Breathing room problems are barriers in your life that are not immediately threatening or potentially harmful to you or your family.

Problems like these should not be ignored.
- Potential loss of job
- Child care problems
- Problems collecting child support
- Long term debt

Problems like these can easily escalate into an emergency if not dealt with. Solving these issues may help to open up new opportunities.

Opportunities Disguised as Problems
When we take a good look at some of our barriers, we may find that these problems will actually challenge you into making your life richer and more satisfying.

These barriers may help you to advocate for yourself, reach out to your community, and develop your own sense of personal power.

While these barriers may be your last priority to work on, these may have the most lasting effect on you and your family. Working on these barriers will make your everyday life run smoother and become much more fulfilling.

Prioritizing the Barriers You are Facing

Return to the checklist and prioritize the barriers that you are facing towards your advocacy goals. Use the categories that were described on the previous page. It may be easily apparent what issues are of top priority, or it may be difficult to categorize. Giving a number rank to your barriers to rank each problem in order of priority may be easier.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Top Priority Problems</th>
<th>Breathing Room Problems</th>
<th>Opportunities Disguised as Problems</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>List the barriers to change that are top priority that you need or want to work on immediately:</td>
<td>List the barriers that you would like to work on but are currently not emergencies or life threatening to you or your family:</td>
<td>List the barriers that you have identified as “low priority” issues. List also any issues that you are facing that may not fit into the other categories</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Once you have identified and prioritized your barriers, you can more clearly see the next step and begin your advocacy journey.

Getting Your Own Way
Following is a list of behaviours that can block your ability to advocate for yourself or others. If one or more of these behaviours related to your own situation, then it is time to stop getting in your own way.

- Act dumb or be over dependent.
- Exaggerate the negative.
- Lash out or blame others if you are disappointed.
- Withdraw, do nothing, or give up.
- Put yourself down.
- Deny that you are having difficulties.
- Accept goals and solutions suggested by others, even when you know these may not be possible to achieve; or give no input to an action plan.

List some other times when you get in your own way.

Overcoming Learned Helplessness
Overcoming learned helplessness requires patience and dedication. Getting over a deeply believed sense of futility is no easy task. Indeed, it may require changing both external situations as well as internal beliefs.

If you suffer from learned helplessness, here are some helpful steps you can take:

- Find out what situations contributed/caused the feelings of futility.
- Acknowledge that although change may take some time, belief structures can be changed. Make a
compassionate decision to work on overcoming learned helplessness.

- Find a good support group or therapist who understands learned helplessness and can help guide you through the rougher times.

Learned helplessness can be very subtle. Because the feeling is so interwoven with our deep beliefs about our worth and abilities, it can be a challenge to overcome. Like any similar psychological phenomenon, feelings of futility can become such a habit that we do not recognize that we are involved in a self-defeating process. Learned helplessness can be overcome, however, with time, patience, vigilance, and compassion towards oneself.

What are some things you can do to overcome your own sense of helplessness?

(Source: Chris M. Carmicheal, 2007)
Section 7: Advocacy Review
Steps to Being an Effective Self-Advocate

Believe in yourself.
The first step to becoming an effective self-advocate is to believe in yourself. Believing in yourself means you are aware
of your strengths, know that you are worthwhile, and are willing to take good care of yourself. Many people who have troubling emotional symptoms or who have a disability struggle with self-esteem. To ask for what you need and want and to protect yourself when others treat you badly, you will need to support your self-worth. You will want to assess, appreciate, support, and improve the way you feel about yourself.

- **Assess**: On a 1-10 scale, what is your self-esteem? If you are undecided, give yourself a 5.
- **Appreciate**: Give yourself credit for as much self-esteem as you do have. It can be hard to hold one's own in the world, and you deserve appreciation for every point you have been able to hold on to. Forgive yourself for the points that lie between you and a 10. You have done the best you can.
- **Support**: What do you do for yourself that supports your well-being? Write down those things, like eating well, making sure you have fun regularly, or pursuing your goals. Write only the good things you do right now, appreciate yourself for them, and vow to continue.
- **Improve**: Think of something you would like to change to improve your well-being. It can be just one small thing that is easy for to stop doing or begin to do; such as exercising more, signing up for a class, or watching less television. It may even be getting out of bed. Sometimes deciding is enough, but here, it is helpful to
make a step-by-step plan of how you are going to change, if you need to.

**Exercises to raise Self-esteem**

- Get together with a trusted friend. Divide a block of time in half, for instance, 20 minutes divided in half would be 10 minutes each. Then, take turns telling the other person everything good about them. Just think, 10 minutes of compliments!
- Go to the library or a Self Help Alliance Recovery Centre, and get a book on building self-esteem. Do any of the suggested activities that feel right to you. Repeat over and over the affirmation:
  
  *I am a unique and valuable person. I am worth the effort it takes to advocate for myself, to get what I want and need for myself, to protect my rights and to insist that others treat me well.*

- Think of other affirmations that you could say to yourself on a regular basis.
- Set a timer for 10 minutes. Write down all of the good things you can think of about yourself. After your time is up, read what you have written. Then fold it up and put it in a convenient place, like in your pocket or next to your bed. Read it over before you go to bed, when you get up in the morning and every time you have a spare moment. If you cannot think of enough things to write in this exercise, ask your friends for ideas before you begin.
• Do something nice for someone else or for your community. Take fresh flowers to a friend, visit a person in the hospital or a nursing home, or clean up the trash in a park.

Decide what you want or what needs to change
Think about your life. What is it that you need and want for yourself? Make a list of these things. For instance, you may want to:

• get a job, or a better job
• find housing in a safe neighbourhood
• change your medications or treatments
• make more money
• lose weight
• buy a car
• have a partner
• take some sick or vacation time

Your list of what you need and want may be very long. In order to make your list more manageable, answer the questions below:

• Which of these things could you achieve, or try to achieve by advocating or speaking out for yourself? Circle those.
• Which of your circled needs and wants is most important to you? Put #1 beside that want or need. Number the others in order of priority. For instance, your #1 might be going back to school. Your #2 might
be getting a better job and #3 might be making more money.

Through this simple process, you have identified your needs or goals, and how important they are to you in your life. It would be overwhelming to begin working on all of your goals at the same time. Start working on meeting these needs and goals by beginning with your top priority. After you have met that goal, or are coming along well with that one, you can begin work on another need or goal.

Keep in mind that your needs and goals may change from time to time. What seems like a high priority now may not seem like such a high priority in several months, when something else may have taken precedence over it.

Get the facts.
When you speak up for yourself, you need to know what you are talking about. You need to gather information and make sure the information you have is accurate. There are many ways to get information:

- Ask people who have done something similar or who have been in a similar situation
- Ask someone who has special expertise in the area you are working on. For instance, if you want to go back to college, meet with a college advisor or a student support program. If you need safe housing, talk to someone in the housing authority
• Study books and other resources you can access through your library, related organizations and agencies, or the Internet
• Contact various agencies and organizations, especially those that specialize in advocacy and education. If this is hard for you to do, ask someone you trust to help you — like a friend, family member, or health care provider.

Once you have the facts you think you need, write them down or make copies, and keep them in a safe place where you know you can find the information when you need it.

**Plan your strategy.**
Now that you know what you want and you have information about it, what do you think is your best strategy for getting what you want or for achieving your goal? What steps would you need to take? You may want to set a timeline and small goals to achieve by certain dates. You may want to think of several ways to address the problem in case one way does not work out. Ask supporters for suggestions. Get feedback on your ideas. Then choose the strategy or strategies.

**Gather support.**
It is easier and usually more effective to work on getting what you want and need for yourself if you have the support of one or several friends, family members, or health care providers. You may even want to start or join a group of people with issues similar to yours such as a self-help or peer support group.
If necessary, call your protection and advocacy organization for support. A good supporter is someone who:

- you like, respect, and trust; and who likes, respects, and trusts you
- allows you the space to change, grow, make decisions, and even mistakes
- listens to you, and shares with you both the good and the bad times
- respects your need for confidentiality, so you can tell them anything
- lets you freely express your feelings and emotions without judging, teasing, or criticizing
- gives you good advice when you want and ask for it assists you in taking action that will help you feel better, and works with you to figure out what to do in difficult situations
- accepts help from you when they need it you want to be with, but do not desperately need to be with
- does not ever take advantage of you

Tell them you are working on becoming a better advocate for yourself. Ask them if they would be willing to help you in this effort by listening to you, giving you feedback from time to time, and being with you when you are taking some difficult steps. Make a list of your supporters contact information and post it in a convenient place where you can easily find these phone numbers when you need them. However, do not
overwhelm your supporters with your problems and needs, and be there for them when they need your help.

Keep in mind that even the very best friend may inadvertently let you down from time to time. No one is perfect. Try to forget the incident and continue with the good relationship you have.

**Assert yourself calmly.**
When you are speaking up for yourself you may get very frustrated and angry if the other person is very negative or difficult to deal with. Stay cool. Do not lose your temper and lash out at the other person, their character, or the organization.

If you lose your temper, it may make it more difficult to get what you want and need for yourself. It will help if you treat the other person or people courteously. Repeating these affirmations repeatedly may help:

*In the process of advocating for myself, I will keep calm because this increases my effectiveness.*

*In the process of advocating for myself, I am committed to speaking out and also respecting the rights of others and listening to what they have to say.*

**Be firm and persistent.**
Do not give up! Keep at it until you get what you want, need, and deserve. It may take a very short time and little effort, but more often, it takes persistent effort over time. Repeat the following affirmation:

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I will be firm and persistent. I will stick with it until I get what I need for myself.

(Adapted from: Source “Speaking Out For Yourself, A Self-Help Guide. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration’s National Mental Health Information Center)

Helping Yourself: Tips and Reminders for Self-Advocacy
Self-advocacy is acting to influence people, agencies, and sometimes, policies. This may seem to be more of a challenge than you want to attempt, but what do you have to lose?

Doing Nothing
You may be afraid that if you speak out about your situation, things may become more difficult or that you will be looked as a “problem”. If you do not let people know what your situation is and how you want it improved, things will likely stay the same. Ask yourself if you want to stay where you are. Ask yourself: “Will things get worse if I do not do anything? If things will stay the same, is that OK with me?”

Overcoming Inertia or Fear
Sometimes you may feel tired and it can be challenging to get the energy to advocate for yourself. Know when you have reached your limit. If you have, it may be a good time to ask someone to help you. If you are afraid, you can still act, and see what happens. It is a risk, but you are worth it.

Stay Calm
No matter how upset you may be or how badly you have been treated, try to stay calm. It may help to talk with someone about what happened to upset you, like a friend, family
member, or a professional. They can offer support and advice. Find an appropriate person you can express your feelings to, but try to remain calm when trying to get your needs met.

Being calm helps when dealing with people because if you are calm, they will likely stay calm too. But if you are angry or aggressive, for example, people will respond to you differently, maybe in ways that will not help you meet your needs or get what you want.

Keep At It
Do not give up once you have started. Remember that you have the right to ask for what you want or need. And you have the right to:

- Speak to someone who has the authority to make decisions.
- Be treated as a competent individual.

Read a recovery book
You can find out how others have dealt with similar situations, discover ideas that might help or learn some new skills.

Go to a group
Self-help or peer support groups are places to share experiences, strengths and hopes. People in these groups can offer practical tools and provide you with a variety of supports and information.
Use community resources or your own resources
Your resources may include family and friends, distress centres, crisis or distress lines, radio or TV talk shows, videos, the internet, journaling, doing household chores, or doing something you enjoy. Exercise is a great stress reducer, even just going for a walk.

Other options are resources in the community like counselling, guidance, a mentor, a teacher, a facilitator, a hospital, a mental health clinic, or a self-help or peer support organization.
Section 8:
Expressions of Advocacy
WE ARE ALL UNIQUE

Cynthia Shutsa

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Signature and Legacy
By Zabrina Tocher

“You can’t run away when you know the tall, tall shadow is yours.” Basia Bulat, from the song, Tall,Tall Shadow.

You have a story that you tell...but careful, or your story will tell you.

This story has been bottled up inside me, untold due to fear, and disallowed. I’ve felt my truth is untrue, crazy, not in words said, but in the isolated expectation of silence and blankness that can make you feel crazy. Yet I know I tell my truth by the healing it gives me.

Recently, a psychiatrist I have seen put it bluntly - I have bad genes. There are at least two or three strains of mental illness running through my father’s family. On his father’s side: undiagnosed manic depression, alcoholism and inexplicable violence. On his mother’s side: depression, anxiety, OCD, hoarding, alcoholism, migraines and a dash of manic depression as well, I believe. On my mother’s side: coldness, narcissism, migraines, epilepsy, but no recognizable, clinical diagnosis.

I used to believe that my family had a signature; a legacy of violence and pain that none of us were exempt from. My aunt told me of the heads of my uncle and father cracking against walls, thrown there as little wee boys. She said she
heard the small heads and bodies hit, splayed on the walls, sliding down. I did not see this but have witnessed my grandfather be suddenly, vilely, violent with a dog, beating it unmercifully for getting in his way. Therefore, I believe it. My whole soul cringed and was in pain when I heard and saw these cruelties. I felt frozen; I could not move. I have often felt trapped within this reaction, within my family.

My grandfather and his brothers were beaten daily, my father and his brothers too. The manic amazingness of my great-grandmother falling later into dementia, her body strong, her sister, a beautiful artist (bucking convention, both of them), she ended up buried in papers that she could not stop collecting. My grandmother, her pinched face in pictures, looking uncertainly ahead. Her brothers each one, an alcoholic. Her sister died young...24. Some say suicide, although cancer is the most acceptable and given answer. I don’t know the truth, but I believe the whisperings of suicide and in my gut, I know it.

My father said at least he didn’t beat us. He often threatened to hit us, and we lived under this threat. He held us so tight when he was drunk and told us he loved us that it hurt in many different ways. And his words... words to scar and burn, and my mother had words that scalded and branded. She hit us when he wasn’t around, dug her nails in, left us feeling that we were bad and unwanted. The word “love” was never used in our house when sober, nor were hugs given. We knew that if we were in trouble, we had no one to turn to; we only had our individual selves. We often turned on each other, my sisters and I; we lived what we saw. Food and clothes were
provided - that was all. We needed so much more and would have traded these comforts for what we needed, given the option. Social services would never have touched an affluent family like ours. I wish that they had. I wish anyone had reached out to us.

My mother’s father was “off”. My grandmother came home one day to find her husband in bed with another woman. She was told to join in; she left. This was a very tough thing in those days. It meant being barred from seeing her children. Her children were told their mother did not ever want to see them again. The coldness, the ice, crept in. They received a stepmother who told them that they could get pregnant from a toilet seat, and worse. At sixteen, on her own, my mother could only exist to work, swallow what may have been, and what she could not handle. She creates her own reality. She was cold with herself too, and this trickled down to us in different ways. My mother is shut off from the world of warmth. She is learning now, but she came with an experience of a father who could not control himself, who cared more about himself than he ever could for his children. Her only choice was to do the best with what she had in front of her.

The words, “Crazy, weak” were whispered words. I knew that they were my family secrets. Each of my parents shunned the other’s parents and families, in response to what they learned. We were alone and isolated, as it often is in alcoholic families; always hearing bad things about the people we were part of. I don’t know about my sisters, but it left me
thinking that I came from bad people on both sides, so I must be a part of this badness.

One of the people I loved the most was one of those whispered about; my grandmother - my father's mother. Someone I admired and loved most in the world was often confined to bed with migraines, unknown illnesses. She reminded me of sumac and poppies, and she had a laugh that you didn’t forget. As she was often housebound, people sat court with her and hung on her every word. There was flair and magic in everything she did. She was a quiet place in the storm - a place to call home and feel safe. She fixed us treats fit for queens, always had art supplies ready for us, listened quietly, taught me everything had a soul, that should be cared for and was willing to give us anything she owned to see happiness. Her father, a tall, gentle man, who had to stoop through doors, watched life through the window in his special seat. He held me in his lap and let me help. Even at that young age, his silence and calm were a salve. They were the first people to teach me hope. They were kind and strong in their quiet ways. Yet they were not respected by most. I loved them dearly. I loved all my family dearly, if in a complicated manner. I so needed them to love me back.

The complicated ones were harder to love. They were the others - people that pretended nothing was wrong, when things were very much anything but right. They were loud, unpredictable, undeniably terrifying in their electricity, anger and distaste for other’s emotions. How could they care, when they were the universe? Grinding Presbyterian work ethic
soaked in silence, distance and distaste. They did have some good qualities, ones of which I paid attention. They did the best they could, considering they did not reflect and learn from their own heartache. Their suffering was tucked away in the boxes they chose, or buried away - coal to diamonds under pressure; they acted out accordingly to the trauma they had endured, seemingly with no choice of their own.

For me my descent into mental illness started in several ways: the obsessions, counting, nursery rhymes, superstitions, and a strong and positive feeling that something bad was going to happen and it was because of me. And then, waking up and being revived after being assaulted, being too young to understand why. Mom was hugging me for the only time I remember, screaming and rocking me and I could not get away. My father telling her to put the phone down and telling the boy he would cut off his wiener. Those are the places my life changed, filled in with the family origin stories of neglect and unworthiness and the insane normalcy that ensued. I was left silently judging myself.

The boy that assaulted me, who lived across the road, whose mom was my substitute teacher at school, never stopped finding ways of hurting me. I always let him because I didn’t know what to do; I had no one to turn to. The signature of abuse followed me everywhere. I felt I deserved it because I had daily contact with the family. I never wanted to be alone. I wanted someone to talk with about what happened. I ached inside day and night with anxiety about what others thought of me, especially about this incident. I kept imagining them
judging me, hating me, thinking of me as dirty. Finally, I thought those things about myself. My sense of self developed in this way, so I could avoid waiting for the other shoe to drop, for everyone to tell me these disparaging, evil things about myself, for them to pass this final and irrevocable judgement against me.

I divorced myself in a physical sense and never really felt connected to who I was or how people saw me. I was an alien and I just could not wrap my head around how people thought, so I always worried and assumed, trying to get ahead of the curve, trying to understand, trying to avoid what I now understand as anxiety. I tried so hard to fit in, to be good. I felt that I had to do good things in order to justify my existence. I began to volunteer when I was six, to try to ease the sense that I did not deserve to live. All this at so young was a heavy burden to bear. The anxiety followed me everywhere - the pain of the thoughts, and actual pain in my body; a sense that I was going to burst out of a skin that was too tight for me. The fact that I never felt clean, and I was never going to belong was who I became.

I watched my father make the choice every day of alcohol over me. As a result, my sense of confidence was never strong and resilient. I watched him kill himself slowly. I had a mother that could not say, “I love you” or anything else positive. We heard the negative as correction; it was added to my arsenal of bad thoughts of self. I craved real interaction, real love, real intimacy, until I did not. It is amazing what you can get used to: the emptiness, the neglect, and the lack of
warmth and belonging. I just wanted to hear that I was good, that they were proud of me and that they cared. I always waited for this. I still wait for this. Today it hurts when my mother is finally able to say that she loves me and tries to care for me. It is painful in a way I do not understand.

Growing up, if I had not had support at school, if I had not been told I was smart and special there, I do not know where and if I would be today. It was one of the only things I had to hold on to; that and creating things, which I innately loved.

Finally in University, the pitch of anxiety, along with the stress of school, a painful breakup, the feeling of not belonging and the perfectionism, led to a breakdown. That was the first time I heard the label depression. I went from the Dean’s list to flunking out in a semester. The race downhill with my functioning and pace of the illness still haunts me. I could not write, I could not read. I could not sleep or wanted to sleep all the time. A kind and insightful professor tried to get me help with a new section of the University for students with Learning Differences, but it was too late. I could not even make sense of my thoughts enough to dictate an essay. I went to student services counselling and remember the lady there telling me I was “Just sad, dear”.

I wanted to scream and rip my hair out. I felt all hope was lost; I was mute, my illness and my family of origin taught me not to speak my story. I knew my life was over, all my purpose and any promises were gone. If this was just “sad”,

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why were people not running around everywhere wringing their hands, crying, pulling out their hair and jumping off bridges? I was in trouble, I knew it and I did not know how to get out. Luckily I had enough courses to get a general BA. Many of my friends, not recognizing me and not knowing what to do, disappeared. I felt very alone. In time, this “aloneness” felt comforting and I preferred it.

I floated and wandered for many years, getting spotty treatment as I never could afford any kind of real and helpful treatment. I did not always meet the criteria; I could look people in the eye, I had not attempted suicide, though I had written notes to loved ones and planned how I would do it. I jumped from job to job, working until the anxiety got too great, then taking a break and finding a new job. I could not make ends meet. This is where my experience with pharmaceutical treatment started too. Serzone, Zoloft, Wellbutrin, Paxil, Prozac, Cymbalta. I lose track; I cannot count them on two hands and feet. I have been on them all it seems, with no real release or escape from the grip of anxiety and depression.

I was alone, frustrated, and felt like a failure. I had gained a tremendous amount of weight from the meds and the depression. I was told that the medication didn’t cause weight gain - I felt even more like a failure. I was told that real depression didn’t last as long as it did in me - not consecutively; I felt more like a failure. I have spent so many days in bed, watching the shadows pass over me as the day passes, with only the tick of the clock to keep me company. I became for the most part, housebound.
Depression and anxiety to me are like a creeping, crawling, clawing, shadow, hulling, scraping me from the inside out. They are all the stories I don’t tell, left to fester and eat me alive. They are what make me want to disappear. They are a scream inside, cloistered to one tiny room in my heart. They are death in the pit of my stomach, oozing into every pore, and any which way I try to get rid of them, a scrap survives to haunt me and grow like a cancer; insidious and sucking me dry, leaving me breathless and exhausted and famished for any joy. They are thoughts that I am worthless waste of skin, unlovable, and many other tapes of paranoia that steamroll through my brain and my life.

My turning point came about 18 years later, when I decided to change how I was doing things, no matter how insane it seemed. Even though I had always worked, often more than one job (mostly in social work), in order to justify my existence, I decided that living to justify my existence was not a way to live. I could barely make it to work anyway; I was getting physically sick and had to take much time to psych myself up to go. I could no longer do my job and decided to stop. Stop everything that was making me ill. I went on public assistance. I sought active, weekly counselling. I began to go outside for walks even though this would induce panic attacks. I started going to a therapeutic art group called, “Spark of Brilliance”. I vibrated with anxiety and it took everything I had to get there - for a couple of years in fact. Until finally, I remembered why I
loved art... the feeling of pride and accomplishment, and the quiet abandon it gave me. I started to heal.

I was diagnosed with Developmental Trauma and got some in-depth help, and in this learned mindfulness. The practice of art with mindfulness is what has been my salvation. This has healed me in ways like nothing else has. Cognitive Behavioural Therapy helped, too. As did advocating for myself, telling professionals my story and what I thought might help me. Choosing the help I thought was relevant for me, and disregarding what did not serve me. Medication for anxiety helped, too. It was determined that anxiety came first in this chicken and egg situation, and that the pressure of it caused the resulting depression. I am not through my journey yet, but far down, I can see the light and this is something new. I can see a possible future for myself that doesn’t mean just scraping by. I can see a future where I decide to help people because I want to, not because I have to. Starting up a therapeutic art group in my area is my first stop along that journey; writing this story is part of this journey as well.

I could choose to accept all this history as bad and part of me, to focus on all the aspects of injury and pain, of only the bad parts of mental illness. I could group my family and me together, as one big lump sum of mental illness and misery. This will continue to make me feel ill and bad about myself. I can choose to realize that this pain is not my own, not created by me, and not part of my life now. I recognize there are many good aspects of my families. My grandmother and my great-grandfather were decent, loving people, regardless of their
illness. Each of us with mental illness is not the same. I choose to focus on their influence and how they live through me. I am cutting ties with my old family of origin story, even my own story of depression and anxiety, and starting to write a new story that has hope figured in it.

I am not my labels. I will not live my life as a combination of my labels. Generalized anxiety, panic disorder, social phobia, agoraphobia, PTSD, depression, borderline traits, and fibromyalgia are a story that could consume me. They are insidious and intertwined, and live on in isolation and fear. It could write me from morning until night - and it has. I refuse to give them this power anymore. I am a complex person with many interests, skills and value that happens to have a mental illness. I will not let those labels define me or let others define me by them. I can choose other labels: kind, empathetic, valuable.

A legacy is something handed down that you don’t have to choose to accept, and a signature is something personal, chosen by you. I choose my life. I choose wellness. I choose not to accept the legacy handed down to me. I will create my own signature.

My advice to you: you are an individual and that despite the chaos; the beauty of your soul is unrelenting. It will shine through. You are not your experiences of abuse or trauma. Trust yourself. You can direct your own care and if it doesn’t feel right, disregard it and move on to something that feels right. Reach out. Depression and anxiety feed voraciously
on isolation. Make mistakes and be okay with it. Love who you are despite (or in spite of) the mess. Remember what is important to you. Find your joys. Focus on what you have learned. The universe is inside you, even if you don’t see it right now. I believe in you.
An Ode to the Void
By S. MacArthur

Heart
Banging
Off the walls
Of this body

Losing self
Losing the plot

Knowing though
It is
Right where
I am

What is the point
Of this pain?

As my heart
Bounces
Around this void
Inside

What is the point
Of this pain?

When beauty
And love

Are all around me
Right here
Right now
Stronger than
Ever

What is the point of
The pain?

So that
The void
Can really open

So that
Love
For self

More than
Ever

Can really
Rush in?

That feels
Right

And
In the meantime

Patience
With mind

Honouring
Of self

Respecting
Of process
Sensing
Of presence

Feeling
Of heart

Deep gratitude
For support
Love
And holding of
Space

And knowing
Inside the
Darkness is
Always light

Where
Healing is
Happening

Here and now
The Maze of Mental Health and Addictions

Supports: Self-Advocacy is the Key.

By Rachel

Travelling through the maze of mental health and addiction supports is not easy, and self-advocacy is essential to get the help one needs. When I first started reaching out for supports, I was so anxious that I was terrified to make a phone call; I wouldn’t even answer the phone. For years, my parents called places for me but in the end, I was faced with the decision to either call and get help or give up. Many places wanted to talk to me directly over the phone in order to offer resources. It has been terrifying talking to people myself, but it has gotten easier.

I have been struggling with mental health issues for years. The first time I felt suicidal I was 12 years old. At that point had no clue how to help myself or even that something was wrong, but somehow I got through it. I coped with my anxiety and depression by doing well in school, perfectionism and an eating disorder. I felt so out of control inside that I was able to control the outside - or so I thought.

I went on a trip at the end of Grade 12 and for the first time I advocated for myself. I shared with one of the leaders on the trip what was really going on. For the first time in my life, I had told someone how I was hurting and put down the perfectionist “A” student mask.
This was an amazing experience but it opened up a can of worms as I continued to struggle, but with support from this team leader and others I was able to tell my parents that I was struggling. I discovered once I started opening up to others that it became easier. I have been in and out of treatment for years and some days (and even some years) are better than others. I find when I reach out for support for myself it is easier, but I also need the support of those around me. I learned to express my thoughts and feelings through art and writing, and by connecting with people who also struggle with similar issues. Even though I was struggling with an eating disorder, addiction, depression, anxiety, PTSD, and Borderline Personality Disorder, I still managed to get a BA in Sociology and Social Psychology. Many people were surprised that I could do it. I dropped out of university twice, each time for a year.

I first had treatment for Anorexia and then went back to school for a year. Then dropped out again due to addiction, and had to go back to treatment. I was able to get on top of my addiction for a while, went back to school, and finished my degree. It took me 8 years instead of four but I kept at it. I asked for help when I needed it and got involved with the center for students with disabilities, which meant I had to go up there myself and ask for help. I had to show up to appointments and open up about how I was feeling. I felt better about myself every day because I was accomplishing something for myself and achieving a BA degree despite having challenges.
I graduated and got a job right away but I did not take the change between university and the real world very well and I relapsed harder than ever; I have spent this last year-and-a-half trying to get better. It’s been a journey and sometimes I feel like giving up and just letting the addiction run its course, but I know I can’t. I can only help myself. No one can truly fix me but myself but I have to reach out to people, go to meetings, get phone numbers and call people when I need support. Get out and stay busy and not be caught up in my own thoughts.

This past year I’ve been to detox numerous times and to treatment centers 3 times. I did not complete the first one and struggled, but I didn’t give up. I went back and tried again - this time completing it! I have been struggling ever since and it is not an easy journey but I know I need to stop relying on other people to fix me and do what is necessary to help myself.

I have been through many high-risk situations during my addiction and mental health issues but that hasn’t stopped me. I have had my share of suicide attempts but kept moving forward. It would be easy to just give up but I don’t want to because I don’t want to sit here and slowly die when I can move forward and get help and support for myself. It’s really hard with waiting lists that seem to go on forever. I’m fighting a fight that seems impossible sometimes. Sometimes I just want to give up and die, but I know I cannot no matter what happens or what struggle is thrown my way. I am also learning that I need to stand up for myself and not rely on my parents.
Now, my greatest struggle is breaking free from a codependent relationship with my parents. Some days it is easier to give in and let them take care of me, but in the long run, I know it just keeps me sick. I am on the waitlist for addictive supportive housing but I am learning that I can only change myself at this moment. Yesterday is gone and tomorrow may never come - I can only change the now, the present, and I can only change myself. I cannot sit and wait for stuff to fall into my lap and need to put more effort in standing up for myself and doing things on my own. When I was in treatment, I made strides in gaining independence and learned that I can do things by myself, that I am capable. The trick now, is to put this into place outside of a treatment center. It is not easy but it’s worth it.

Recovery happens every day, every hour and is a work in progress. Over time, I have learned how to self-advocate for myself and still have a ways to go, but I have learned that when I ask for the help I need, I am able to live my life independently the best I can. I feel better about myself, have learned that I am not worthless, and I have ability to take care of myself. My thoughts, feelings and opinions are just as important as everyone else's.

However, self-advocacy is a process. For the longest time I did not even realize that I needed to, but couldn't stand up for myself and wanted others to fix me. Self-advocacy is important but if one does not have the self-esteem to even want to feel better, a boost from others can help them get on track. It is hard to advocate for yourself if you do not believe
you deserve it. I needed people alongside me who believed in, loved me, and showed me that I do deserve recovery and that I am capable of advocating for my own needs.

Afterthought: As I sit here going over my story before publication, I am very grateful for how far I’ve come. I have just over two months sober and I am amazed at how much life has changed in a positive way. This all started because I began to advocate for myself!
L. Ann Prince
**William's Story**

By Marlow

(Names in this story have been changed
in order to protect identities)

My son, William, has Asperger's Syndrome - a neurological condition that is best described as high-functioning autism. I had never heard of Asperger's, until my son was in early grade-school years.

What this is and how we came to find about it has been a journey and a struggle that William and I have shared. The institutions and services we have negotiated with and around, have played a part in this discovery. Although we have encountered some intelligence and understanding, there have been far too many instances of abuse, ignorance and indifference. Advocating for William within the public school and mental health systems has created many difficulties.

William experienced physical and emotional abuse from the public school system. We experienced ignorance from the Children’s Aid society, indifference from the mental health system and some real help from the Regional Support System. This abuse has affected William his entire life and has damaged his mental health - the effects of it he and I are still experiencing.

During my pregnancy and after William was born, I knew that William was a completely different child than my first-born. He was a direct contrast to his older brother. While
in my womb, Christopher constantly moved, twisting and turning and rolling around. Although there was movement and I was never worried that something was wrong, William was calm. He was a mellower baby. Christopher came out into the world wiggling and wriggling. William entered the world and was serene. He was a sweet, gentle baby and nursed without any problems.

William was born a Leo with his moon in Aquarius; Christopher was born an Aquarius with his moon in Leo: yin and yang. Christopher talked early, and often. Talking was non-stop and an all-day conversation between the two of us.

William didn’t talk until well past his second birthday, and when he did talk, he invented his own language. Food was called “UM”. Cake, ice cream or any treat was called, “Ha Ha Um”. Pizza was “Pie UM”. There was no doubt of his intelligence; he was just different.

While playing in the backyard, if Christopher spotted people walking down the sidewalk he would run towards them and delightedly shout, “PEOPLE! PEOPLE!” run up to them and greet them. When William saw people, he would hide behind the big Manitoba Maple and wait for them to walk past the yard. He would cling to me and insist on being carried everywhere.

William could put together Lego sets geared towards much older children. He carefully followed the pictorial instructions. He would spend hours lining his toys up. He loved
to play hide and seek. The baby, toddler and early years passed. That was a warm, cuddly time. Then, the preamble to school.

I attempted to take him to the same nursery school Christopher went to, but he was unwilling to go and would cling to me, refusing to enter the school. A few months later, we attempted another nursery school that was in a nursing home. The location was a well-meaning attempt to integrate small children with the elderly. We had to go through the main entrance in order to get to the school. William had to walk past a group of amputees that were having their morning smoke. On the first day, William said to me, “This sure doesn’t look like a nursery school.” It was a struggle to get him to go, but it was just nursery school, and I thought that in time he would accept going to school.

When it was time for kindergarten, there was a compassionate principal. The situation of William’s refusal to attend school was discussed and some solutions were found. I was allowed to attend kindergarten with him. William would sit on my lap during story time. There were times that he would go and when he did not. It was accepted.

Grade 1 was completely different. The warm, compassionate principal was replaced by Mrs. B. She was a rigid uncompromising woman. She insisted that nothing was wrong with William; the problem was that I too lenient with him at home - he simply had a behavioural problem.
The school lowered the boon and I was told he *had* to go to school every day. The school informed me that I had to force him to go. They made us carry him to school even if he was screaming. Often, he would hide in the basement of our house. It became a huge battle. I can vividly remember sitting on the stairs in my home and feeling absolute dread; this is what it was going to be like for many years. I was right.

While all of this was going on, I was living with another major problem. My husband Edward was a severe alcoholic who had a job as an accountant for a manufacturing company. Edward also had an elderly mother who made many demands on him. That meant I was often left on my own to deal with William and the school, except for the times when Edward would help me carry William into school. On those days, I hoped that we would not encounter a teacher because Edward would look in such a rough state from the previous night of drinking.

When William was uncooperative, he was sent to the behavioural room. This was a separate room devoted to dealing with children with behavioural problems. It was a cold, formidable room that was sparse and void of any of the colourful accoutrements of a normal classroom. This became a torture chamber for William. When William would scream, the teacher would put one hand on top of his head and the other under his chin, which would close his mouth. William became frightened and could not breathe. They would also force William into a desk by pushing him onto a chair and then
shoving a desk on top of him. I was appalled. I tried to talk to
the school but they were certain that they knew what was best.

Many years later, William told me that “Mrs. B” had
made him lie down on her office floor and would roll her desk
chair into him. I hired a private social worker. I told her about
this abuse and she encouraged me to call Children’s Aid and
make a complaint against the school. At this time, Christopher
had a cold and had been absent for some time. The school used
this situation to bring a complaint against me. By this time, I
was completely overwhelmed by everything and the house
showed it. My house was in disarray. They had me. The abuse
by the school was forgotten by Children’s Aid and then they
began their investigation of me.

Of course, I had to organize the house, that was
understood and I went ahead and worked on it. Then came the
enforced parenting classes. The classes were for the most part,
pretty basic and tolerable. However, the ignorance and
counter-productiveness of Children’s Aid became blatantly
apparent during one class.

I am a certified chef, who has had European training.
Food is important to me, and the “class” given by a nutritionist
proved to be an example of the absurdity of their ignorance. It
was deplorable; she had a slide show of foods, showing pictures
of hot dogs and how many one needed to eat in order to get
adequate protein. Examples of meat alternatives were a can of
beans and a jar of peanut butter. All of this food seemed to
encourage ill health among the poor. I got my back up and challenged the nutritionist.

Why didn’t they show pictures of delicious, affordable food such as vegetarian burritos or a tofu stir-fry? Why did they not encourage true healthy eating that took the focus from factory-made foods, and encourage the love of good food? I was reprimanded by Children’s Aid for my input. In the meantime, Regional Support Services became involved and a psychological assessment was made. I must commend this service, as it was a change to encounter their nonjudgmental help.

Finally, William was given a diagnosis of Asperger’s. William’s behaviour began to make sense. The school bells, the bright lights of the classroom and the loud noises in the school were painful to him. People with Asperger’s find stimulation magnified and unbearable. His senses were amplified.

He would have certain tastes in food that he preferred. He would refuse to eat fake maple syrup and would only eat the real stuff. He hated the feel of denim and to this day, he will not wear jeans. When he would have a bath, he would insist on a certain type of soap. Receiving the diagnosis was a great relief and then William was finally allowed to stay at home. He had a tutor teach him and he was successful.

However, Children’s Aid continued to prove its ignorance. We had a social worker assigned to us who did not even bother to research the basics of Asperger’s. The social
worker from Children’s Aid also suggested that I attend a seminar on future careers for people with Asperger’s. She said, “After all, you can’t expect William to be a rocket scientist.” I could not contain myself. I replied, “Are you not aware that probably most, if not all rocket scientists and computer geniuses have Asperger’s?” William re-entered the public school system in Grade 8 and attended school with some regularity.

William is 19 this year. He is working on finishing his last three high school credits.

However, when he was sixteen, he experienced a breakdown. He could not sleep for days at a time. His psychiatrist and counsellor were worried that he would become schizophrenic. He has been on a slow recovery ever since. He has tried several different medications - some have been effective, some have not. It was discovered that he had a gluten intolerance as well, which explained his frequent stomach aches. William has had many mental health issues that resulted from the treatment he received as a young child in school.

Years of frustration and anger fermented in William. Attempts at getting real help for his mental health issues were stymied by a lack of any real help. William was feeling genuine anger, and was expressed it by smashing at walls, and prolonged screaming. He was angry with his father for his selfishness, his alcoholism and his lack of interest in being a father.
During the winter and spring of 2014, William made many attempts to get help. A mental health organization had written him off as they said he was not co-operating with them. William wanted help desperately and took himself to the emergency department. Each of the five times William went to emergency at the hospital, which he felt was the only place left for him to get some help, he told them about his anger. The last time the emergency nurse would not let him see the psychiatrist. He was sent home.

It was getting serious now; William was entertaining the idea of doing someone some serious harm. He went to my friend’s house and told her that if he could get away with it, he would commit homicide. I took him to our doctor and told him this.

One night he snapped. A blankness came over his eyes and William was absent from himself. He came at me. He screamed, “You pathetic piece of s***!” and he started to flail at me with his fists. I managed to kick him off me and I called his father to come over to the house. William attacked Edward and Edward yelled at me to call 911.

I did and the police came; they handcuffed him and took him outside. The police officer asked me if this was a criminal or mental health issue. I said it was a mental health issue and he was taken to the hospital. I went to see him the following day. He was crying and very sorry for his actions. His sorrow and regret was sincere. He was deeply worried that he
would not have a home anymore. I assured him that he did. He was kept in hospital for 18 days.

Following his confinement at Homewood Health Centre, he went to a Forensic Psychiatrist. He was told to, “Just let your anger and the past go, and move on”, which was very similar to the message that he got from a different psychiatrist who told him, “Don’t think bad thoughts.” If only it could be that easy.

We have some hope as William has finally found an empathetic and intelligent therapist. He is examining the roots of his anger in a safe way. Safe for himself and safe for others.

William is continuing therapy and feels that his issues are being taken seriously and dealt with intelligently. I pray that eventually William will get some justice and peace with the abuse that he suffered from as a child.

(This advocacy project started within the second week of William’s hospitalization. It has been a blessing as it has given me a chance to find my voice and clarify the story during this painful time.)
Lisa Lindsay – “Letting Go”
The Seed
By Zabrina Tocher

The center
The center is the story.
What is within and hidden.
What is protected.
Held sacred?
What dots connect the spirit
and keep it going
when hope does not?
What do we hold on so tight to
it seems to fracture and release to the universe
or implode
and disappear.
Does it reform?
Will we?
What seeds are planted within that need to grow
in wonder, with compassion?
Is it crowded there?
pushed down, swallowed, smashed
on the shore
broken with our heart and our mind.
Will we carry this or let it go?
Will we hold it tight to fester
and eat us inside out?
My hope for you is this
That you plant or recognize the seed
you hold
that lifts your heart, mind and soul
that you nurture it in soil you cherish
and grow up with it
both of your faces to the sun.
Rachel – “Can Anybody See Me?”
We’ve Come too Far
By L. Ann Prince

There are things that I remember about my childhood. I remember telling people that I got high on fresh air and sunshine - bubbly days where it felt more than good to be alive. I remember, too, the days where the world was too large a place, and anxiety and depression held me in a fast grip. But, it wouldn’t be until I was in university that things took a shape and a form that I could recognize.

I was sitting on the bus, heading to a class, and I remember thinking that I needed to pack my bags and book myself into the local psychiatric care hospital. It was such an odd thought and so completely out of the blue, that I didn’t get off at my stop. Instead, I rode to the university’s student centre, went to the counseling desk and asked to speak to someone. That would be the beginning of my journey with mental illness in a formal manner.

In my family, mental illness runs rampant. Amongst my aunts and cousins, it comes in all shapes and sizes. Of my mother’s six biological children, every one of us has encountered either a diagnosis, or a decision to deliberately not seek one out. Of my biological nieces and nephew, all have had similar experiences. Now, my daughter has been added to the number.
None of us are victims, but this is our life. For years we haven’t been allowed to talk about it openly within our families or society. It has left us silent, and alone.

This is our story.

The first time I sought out medical help for depression, the subject of my family history came up. I knew of a handful of family members who suffered; both manic and chronic depression had come to light in the past. Asking my mother added some names I hadn’t known were on the list. I didn’t feel so alone in what I was facing. This would change.

I was given a prescription and told the medication would probably take several weeks to kick in. By the third day, the world had regained the colours I hadn’t even noticed were missing. I spent an entire day looking at things in amazement. That would be the beginning of my journey with pharmaceuticals.

When I tried to speak to members of my family about depression, the reactions were varied in intensity, but the message was clear: we didn’t talk about it in public or to one another. I was bewildered. How did we just ignore this issue? I wasn’t sure what it meant if we didn’t talk about it then. Not a lot of people talked about mental illness freely. It bothered me. I had mental illness. I was a sufferer of Chronic Clinical Depression, and later diagnosed with Seasonal Affective Disorder that same year. I didn’t see how pretending that it
didn’t exist helped me. I wanted to know what the experience was like for others who were close to me. It seemed important.

I didn’t want to be alone.

When a member of your family has heart disease, everyone knows who else in the family was a sufferer. Family lines are traced. People get tested for prevention and early detection. So why was this thing, this mental illness, so very different?

I didn’t understand. When my family treated it like something shameful, it made me a smaller, more uncertain person. When I made the necessary decision to go off medication because I no longer had drug coverage and could not afford my prescription, it was difficult. I reacted badly to the experience, my body taking more than double the normal time to wean off the drug. I was terrified to go back on medication, fearing that this would happen again. I had nobody to talk to about my fears or my experiences. The best I could hope for was an extended period without depression.

What followed were years of ups and downs that I didn’t see except in hindsight. The bills that didn’t get paid. The packages of things I had bought but never opened. The half-finished projects that cluttered my home and my life. Small moments of clarity, and extended periods of the world moving on around me in a blur.

It would be years before I would go on medication again, and when I did, my new doctor shamed me - something I
had never experienced from the medical profession before. I was told, in no uncertain terms, that I was just bored, and directed to read a book on self-esteem. When I pushed, a prescription was reluctantly written, but it didn’t change how that initial visit made me feel. I had gone for help with a chronic problem and to be told essentially that it was all in my head only served to increase my own doubts and fears about what I was experiencing.

Shortly thereafter - within weeks - I became pregnant, and stopped the new medication cold turkey. It would take me over a month to go searching for a new doctor to have that pregnancy confirmed because I no longer trusted the medical profession.

After my daughter was born, I suffered profound Postpartum Depression. It wasn’t something that I was aware of at the time, but I do remember putting my infant in her bed and going into my room and crying until I was exhausted. I knew, at the very least, that she was safe while I was incapable of taking care of her.

When my husband and I separated, she was barely a toddler, and I was unable to function. I lost over forty pounds in a month due to stress, and started experiencing symptoms that frightened me - the feeling of hot and cold boiling water under my skin. Anxiety was formally added to my roster of problems and I was back on medication. I was reluctant to take this step for various reasons, but it was necessary.
It wasn’t an easy road. I began a pattern of taking increasing doses until toxic levels were achieved, and moving to a new class of drugs. I began to hate myself and the fact of my existence. People would say, “Well, if you had diabetes, you’d take medication daily”, as though that was some sort of consolation. Except, that unlike diabetes, I had an illness that people told me was all in my head, and treated me like I was making it up. Family members would come up to me and tell me to, “Just get over it”. One thought it appropriate to ask why I wasn’t doing something with my life given that I’d gone to university. Because I had mental illness, I was fair game for the open judgment of others.

It became clear to me, because I started researching mental illness - depression in particular - that what I was experiencing was more than just Chronic Clinical Depression. Things just didn’t add up. When I spoke to my doctor, I had to push to see a psychiatrist. I wanted to know one way or another, what was going on in my head. Why things were never quite right. Why I just couldn’t seem to function the way so many others around me seemed to be able to.

That would be the beginning of a wait to see someone who could give me answers, and the formal diagnosis of Bi-Polar Disorder, Type I, Mixed Episodes. My first drug was Lithium - the “gold standard”, as my psychiatrist referred to it. It was her medication of choice, but it involved even more blood draws. I got my first standing order card at the laboratory. I didn’t have to carry a piece of paper with my anymore when I went, they had my card on file with all the
things for which they needed to take my blood. I hadn’t even known such a thing existed before then.

Two things happened after that: my psychiatrist declared she was retiring, and I started having adverse reactions to the Lithium which, while working for me, was no longer a viable option. I had started losing my hair in large amounts, and then the tremors and shakes began. It was decided that I needed to change medication; the tremors and shakes were not a good sign.

My care was returned to my family practitioner, and I began my journey through finding other classes of drugs, and doses that would work for me. I put on over one hundred pounds in a short period of time. When a medication would stop working for me, and another be suggested, my first question started to become, “Is weight gain a side effect?” That seemed to be a side effect of all of them, and the one I always had.

I went on disability because as my daughter moved into the school system, I was required to go to work, and I was unable to function for more than short periods at a time. Anything more than my limited capacity to cope, and I just shut down. I couldn’t think. I couldn’t make decisions. I couldn’t tend to even the most basic of tasks. My doctor agreed with me.

That began a new round of shaming from my family and others who thought they had the right to chastise me for not working because they couldn’t “see” what was wrong with
me. Because they felt that I was intelligent and educated, somehow that meant that I couldn’t also have a problem. I felt even more ashamed of myself and constantly found myself apologizing for and explaining myself to people who I didn’t owe an explanation. That, too, made me feel ashamed and the need to withdraw from the world.

Like so many others in my position, I was adrift, and alone.

I don’t know when something shifted for me. It might have been as simple as just getting fed up with always being afraid that someone might ask what I did for a living, or merely just finding myself exhausted by the constant justification, even to myself, that I wasn’t just imagining this. The constant justification of my existence. That I wasn’t just lazy and stupid. But it wasn’t easy. Society didn’t want to know that people like myself existed. They wanted to believe that if you had mental illness, there must be something profoundly wrong with you, as though it were a thing they could see by merely looking at you. Intelligent and well-educated people didn’t get mental illness. If they did, then anyone could. That scared people.

The problem was had mental illness. Therefore, I had two choices: I could accept the shame and continue to hide and apologize, or I could do something different; I could stand up and speak out. I could stop being invisible. I stopped apologizing.
My daughter has recently begun her journey. I find that being an advocate for her is a difficult task when advocating for myself sometimes exhausts me. She said something that made me both very sad and very proud, because in her I see a new face of mental illness. She said, “I’ll be glad if they give me a diagnosis, because then I would know it’s not just me being stupid.”

We have a long way to go before mental illness isn’t something to be borne with shame and fear. I can’t take my daughter’s steps for her though; she will have to create her own story. What I can do is walk beside her as I take my own so that she knows that she is not alone. I have hopes that her journey will be different from mine. That she will find her place and her voice. I have to believe that. We’ve come too far to give up hope now.

For me, it’s been a long journey, and not an easy one. I’ve been on good medications and bad ones. I’ve discovered, through a recent disastrous period off medication, that I am not a candidate to be unmedicated. Medication will always be a daily part of my life. I have had to accept and embrace that. Anxiety and Panic Disorder have been added to my portfolio of diagnoses. I’ve been on medications that, while helping me, have also left me unable to feel any emotions (good or bad), or remember simple events of the day before. I lost all connection to my creativity, and didn’t write for years - something that had once given me much satisfaction and joy.
It has taken work. I now network with others that I have found with similar problems. I research new drugs and go to my doctor armed with questions, and I am no longer afraid to ask for dose changes when I am uncomfortable with what a medication is or is not accomplishing for me. I have opted for a less medicated life in a trade-off that leaves me less stable, but more connected to the world I live in.

This is who I am. My existence will always be coloured by this illness. I will always take medication. I am never going to be what society considers “normal”. My ability to negotiate this illness only goes so far, but I am not afraid of it anymore. Or ashamed. I speak up and out. When people have questions, I answer them frankly and honestly. When I hear people making erroneous statements, I correct them.

Some of my days are good. Some aren’t. I can live with that. I have an illness - it doesn’t have me. Locally, I have found others who I can connect with for shared safe-space events. There is no fear or shame. We all share a story. I feel that I have found a community.

I am no longer alone.
Lisa Lindsay – “Magic on the Wind”
lips and words pressed flat and tight as flowers between old books, dust getting in the way, acting as glue
eyes flat as coins placed at a wake, zipped closed with stitches beneath
limbs within limbs, fragile connections within and without sustaining, reaching
snipped short, clipped precise
deprived of air, water, food, nurture
the synapse of smile forgotten, neurons travelling to friendship at lost ends
days curl in, curl up, brown, dying shoes
she grows in breath like a shadow gathering
darker and more form
whispering, whispering, she is your only friend and in the darkness, it seems so until she becomes the dark trees of winter
baleful, spiteful, black, gnarled and reaching, angry she claws her way from belly up, ripping and shredding, through your chest to your thoughts no hair to pull out, hands to wring, she pulls apart from within, yanks out anything of importance and all that is not guts you like a pumpkin or gourd first your heart and last your soul
she wails and screams, trapped, blowing up foetid,
corpselike inside till your skin hurts and is too tight
she was the one I lived with.
When I poked a hole, brave one day, the sun got in
showed in the cracks, things I had not seen
beauty and grace
a scrap of yellow fabric,
green grass silently mouthing the word grow
purple and oranges that spoke of sunsets, sunrise, les fauvres
they all brought joy and tears to this tired soul
together, they spelled hope for me
and eased the winter into spring.
The Successful “Mental Patient”:
Thriving in the Face of Adversity
By Amanda Weckwerth, MA

"He is able who thinks he is able" Dali Lama

Ever since I can remember (probably around grade 8), I aspired to attain my Master's degree in Psychology followed by my Ph.D., with the hopes of someday becoming a clinical psychologist. Looking back all these years later, I really can see my overwhelming naiveté. I had no idea what I would have to endure to accomplish my goals. It was this dream of mine, which in many ways helped me not to stray too far off course with the temptations many teenagers engage in and via acting as the wayward of my life. It helped me to bounce back after each train wreck, and not succumb to the seeming hopelessness and disparity I experienced resultant of my mental health issues (MHI's) namely; Bipolar Type-2; PTSD, OCD, ADHD, anorexia and bulimia, specific phobias, agoraphobia, Seasonal Affective Disorder, Panic Disorder, Generalized Anxiety Disorder, and substance-abuse issues.

For the scope of this essay, I will briefly touch upon my striving to achieve success in spite of the barriers I had to face on route to living a "normal life." It is my intent to provide some hope to those of you who may or may not be suffering with MHI's; that is, although at times things may seem tough or even impossible, one can still achieve success in spite of adversity.
The adversity I speak of came to me relatively early at 15 years of life. I didn’t come from a bad home, nor did I experience anything bad; quite the opposite. I grew up with two parents and two brothers; my parents were very much devoted to their children and each other. While nothing happened to make me “mentally chill” as I would later be diagnosed (as I will explain) I cannot say the same for my f***** up genes. My parents said that because they were the oldest in both their families and the first to have kids they had no idea how f***** or potent their genes and combination of them was. When desperate they would say regrettably in frustration that they should never have had kids. My parents’ siblings were either depressed drug-addicts, or neurotic.

It is worth mentioning that prior to diagnosis and dealing with the sudden onset of an illness as well as symptoms, which led to teasing by peers, etc., I could have been considered an asshole in disguise. I was very judgmental of others and their "less than perfect behaviour." I was one of those individuals, who for example, would see a fat person eating a cheeseburger and think, "Why the hell doesn’t she eat a salad?" I was so anal that when I got my dad to drive me to school, I insisted he not drop me off where the smokers did their thing because in my mind smokers were losers. Go figure that I would myself become a chain smoker in the not so distant future.

Believing strongly in karma, I would soon be nipped in the ass for every single belief that my mind, up until the age of 16, could conjure up. I started smoking cigarettes and
shoplifted quite a few times before being caught at age 14. I was caught stealing a bottle of cover-up at a drug store despite having $80.00 in my pocket; I, like many people with MHI's was a thrill seeker. Furthermore, I lost my virginity and began experimenting with acid and marijuana - my answer to life’s problems.

During what I call my crazy stage (or first unknown episode of hypomania), I had one friend, Helen, who went along with me on my crazy journey. One time, Helen and I went to her boyfriend’s house - a really shady dump. There was absolutely nothing in his house but a kitchen table. That was the first time I tried hash. After smoking up I noticed that his floor was almost completely slanted. I didn’t know if it was just me or the drugs, so I inquired; turns out his floor was indeed on a slope. After smoking up, we went to the local fair and stumbled clumsily about. I think that was the only time I ever did hash.

In retrospect, taking into account the many negative experiences that I have endured, if I had a choice I would choose to be ill. Oddly enough, there are others in my situation that would also choose the disorder. I do not mean this in a sick way; my choice is best understood in the context that being struck with issues, which were beyond my control, changed me profoundly - in a good way.

I learned quickly about kindness and compassion. As the Dali Lama has noted, kindness and compassion are necessary for a good life.
Having illnesses which caused me to act in ways which I could not control, I soon began to realize that there were underlying reasons behind people's behaviour, that perhaps their behaviour was not their fault or was beyond their control. Once I came to this realization, I could, and still cannot judge another for his or her behavior operating under the assumption that there must be a reason behind it. Being ill, especially with a highly stigmatized illness provided me with the experiences I would not have been afforded (i.e., being misunderstood, differential treatment, low self-worth, embarrassment and humiliation) typically experienced by oppressed populations. Though I faced, and still continue to face stigma, stereotyping and differential treatment, I have coped remarkably well with the injustices I had incurred. I can’t stress enough the importance of humor in being able to cope effectively. As an aside, I have never met a person with MHI’s who didn’t have a good sense of humor. Humor is especially important in terms of maintaining your sense of self-worth and acts as a means of self-preservation. You really have no choice but to laugh at yourself or find humor in a situation; if you didn’t you’d probably end up crying a river of tears.

I learned about the power of attitude from the individuals I met at a Bi-Polar support group I attended in high school and part way into university. I have to laugh as I recall an episode at my support group at the age of 18. Anyone who knows me knows that I seldom get angry; at the time, I had PMS, poorly managed symptoms and experienced extreme agitation. What happened was that a new person, an old man,
attended one of our meetings; he started out by telling us all that we were just complainers trying to get attention. I got so pissed off that I did something I had never done in my life - I yelled at him at the top of my lungs. I remember quite vividly what I had said. “You f****** a******. You don’t belong in this group. You should be attending the psychopath group. Look at you - you are useless you have to wear Velcro shoes because you are incapable of tying your own f****** shoes. Get the f***out of here inhumane squirrel shooter, f****** psychopath...either you go or I will.” After shouting at the top of my lungs, I went outside to cool off. Members were shocked to see me act in such a manner as I had never ever raised my voice. Choosing me over him, they politely escorted the old man outside.

The many negative experiences I experienced related to being “mentally chill” however, strengthened my determination to pursue my goals of being a psychologist, a therapist; someone who could help others and empower others in similar situations as myself. I could now move beyond being sympathetic to being empathetic. Not wanting to succumb to the low expectations of me held by others (since my diagnosis), my thoughts about my dream changed from, “I will try to succeed”, to, “Under no circumstances will I fail to achieve my goals”. Being sick further motivated me to achieve my goals, and my stubborn side pushed me to prove all of my naysayers wrong. I’ll admit, I was definitely discouraged many times, but to me failure was not an option. I would die (and almost did) before I failed at my highly commendable endeavors.
Even in high school, lying on the floor of my bedroom, crying hysterically for over a year, the second I thought of my goals, with great strength I pulled myself up, muttering to myself that since I had no real choice of whether I die or not, I had might as well go on to pursue my dream. I made my resolve after my first and only serious suicide attempt.

Why I never attempted suicide again as a teen was not as simple as only making a resolve not to do so. I attended what would be a life-changing event for me, which to this day prevents me from seriously attempting suicide. During this period, at the age of 16, I attended a wake of a 16-year-old girl (my boyfriend's best friend) who had committed suicide. Seeing the parents who stood beside their daughter lying in a coffin, I vowed that I would never attempt suicide again, and I never have to this day. Resultant of this firm decision, I rationalized that since I had to live, I might as well live a good life. Every decision I made was made in terms of whether or not my behaviour was conducive to the attainment of my goals and dreams.

Through many trials and tribulations, and working around my disabilities, I was able to complete my Bachelors in psychology and my Masters in psychology. Although, throughout my post-secondary and Masters Education I was met with disbelief and surrounded by many naysayers who were concerned with my apparently fragile eggshell mind, I held steadfast when it came to attaining my goals; education was my right. Education was the only thing that I believed that stigma, stereotyping and differential treatment cannot rob you
of. Though I knew how important education was in general, I realized just how much more important it is to have an education if you suffer from a MHI.

That is to say, it is unfortunate that in many ways (resultant of one’s illness) education level determines not only one’s opportunities but also the way in which people treat you.

The pursuit of a higher education in my case I will tell you, literally almost cost me my life. Although I managed to find a psychiatrist in Waterloo, he unfortunately moved cities without telling anyone. My mental health went from stable to disastrous. I ended up being hospitalized for three days after falling asleep on the phone with a crisis worker and woke up three days later in the hospital. After that, I was required to see a psychiatrist at an adjunct program affiliated with the hospital by a psychiatrist who saw me when I awoke after three days of being hospitalized. To make the long story short, I was abruptly pulled off the benzodiazepines I had been on for over a decade and ended up suffering from sudden Acute Benzodiazepine Syndrome, which includes psychosis and sudden death. Without a psychiatrist, I was left to fend for myself. Shortly after being pulled off my benzodiazepines, I became psychotic - embarrassing myself in front of my peers and professors. Furthermore, I began to experience sudden symptoms of PTSD, unbeknownst to me at the time. Lastly, I ended up becoming a drug addict in my attempts to cope with the PTSD.

My crazy behaviour led to forced medical leave and an embarrassing return to school. Though I was able to complete
my degree, I am still recovering from memory loss and am unable to work as a result of the PTSD, though I do volunteer. Although I will not go into detail, my post-secondary experiences were terrible relating to supports for and treatment of students with MHI’s. It is a system crying for better supports for persons with MHI’s. My schooling made one thing clear - that although universities are prohibited from discriminating against students in relation to accessing post-secondary education, the supports in my case and country-wide via poor, absent or inaccessible institutional supports sends the message, “Sure you can come, but we will not support you once you are here”.

With knowledge about the poor institutional supports and the related poor retention rate of this population (resultant of the lack of effective supports), I felt compelled to complete a Needs Assessment of Laurier students with MHI’s with the development of a usable action plan for Laurier to use as they saw fit to implement new/effective programmatic supports and accommodations. This study was quite empowering for me as I was able to build a house, so to speak, with the proverbial bricks thrown at me along my educational journey; I had managed to achieve not only my Master’s degree but was able to publish my undergraduate thesis by the age of 21.

To conclude, I am living proof that with perseverance and determination anything is possible - illness or not. If I had one piece of advice to impart to youth with mental health issues, it would be yes, whatever you do will almost invariably be stressful for you - that’s a given. You have two choices: sit
back to avoid straining yourself, or refuse to settle for less than you have dreamed of. Your dream is your right, as are the battles you will likely face in pursuit of your goals. Never, ever settle for less than you know you are capable of. Though my life is not quite where I would like to be, in my life I make improvements every day and have no intention of slowing down. I will achieve all of my goals, but as I have learned I just might have to figure out a different way of achieving my dreams and becoming empowered; so is the nature of recovery.
The Rollercoaster Ride
By Rachel

I sit here wondering, waiting,
Wanting someone to save me,
Wanting someone to help me up,
Because it's not my fault anyways.
They hurt me,
They abused me,
Why should I change?
But again and again I ride,
This rollercoaster of life.
And nothing changes,
But then I realize,
I can get off.
So I do for a moment,
Then get back on.
It's their fault I failed,
Their fault I got back on the ride,
I get off again and realize,

That only I can get off that ride,
No one is holding me down,
I'm not a child anymore,
I can get off,
I don't need to stay trapped,
In the pain and shame.
I still get on but get off quicker.
Then I realize there are others on the ride,
I talk to them and we get off together.
I help others off the ride,
I ask for help when I need it,
When I slip I get back up as soon as possible,
And eventually avoid the ride all together.

I am travelling a new road,
One where I take charge of myself,
One where I own the blame,
And know,
That I can only change myself.
Victims must tell and keep telling

Dear Editor:

Re: 'Alternate personality wanted sex; lawyer; Woman said none of her personalities consented, but rape trial stops after testimony' (Guelph Mercury, Nov. 9).

Last Tuesday evening, I thought the long ordeal that had started in the early morning of July 3, 2004 was finally over. Tears flowed freely from the relief. I was not prepared for the sucker punch I received when I saw the headline in your paper the following day.

My first reaction was shock, but then I addressed the problem directly and called your office. Later, after steadying myself emotionally, mentally and spiritually, I told myself, once again, it's over.

The next day I discovered more loose ends. The article was being discussed by people who knew I was the one being referred to in it, and people who had no idea. Repeatedly, women said that if that was what they could expect, they wouldn't report a rape.

I am writing this because I want all women, and men, to know — even knowing now what to expect — I would choose to go through the process again. I want to encourage anyone who has been violated to tell and keep telling.

I did what I did out of conviction that it was the right thing to do. The price tag of not following through on that moral obligation would have been much heavier than any temporary discomfort I suffered.

Our justice system is not perfect, but there are good people in it. Those people believed me and were a great support. If anyone is reading this and is discouraged by the headline, thinking that reporting a crime against them is not worth it, remember there are people who will help and support you too.

- Name withheld

Guelph

Editor's note: The name of this letter writer is being withheld because a publication ban tied to the court case restricts identification of the letter writer.
Letter to the Editor
By Anonymous

This story is about a letter that I wrote during a difficult time. I wrote a letter to the Editor of my local newspaper in response to an article about a rape trial. As I have continued to heal from the events in my life that letter has been helpful. I am proud of that letter. I now see that by writing that letter I was reclaiming my power when I spoke up. My letter allowed me to take back a story from the media, a story that was and is mine to tell. The letter reminds me that I am strong. It reminds me of the things I value, and I want to share it with you.

Emotionally, the story starts with my dog, Dukaroo (Duke). He was a 160-pound Rottweiler who I loved very much and who got very sick and had to be put down. When he died, I thought he had had cancer. I later understood that he was poisoned by a man who would later break into my home and assault me.

During the assault, my attacker said, “I’m glad you don’t have that dog anymore. That dog intimidated me.”

He said it at a time when I was giving up inside but at the mention of Duke I was filled with the memories of him and how he would not want this to be happening to me. With the thought of Duke in my head, I fought harder and in ways that seriously injured my back but more importantly got us off the bed.
A month and a half later, the police brought me in to do a photo line-up. I will never forget the attacker’s eyes. Afterward I found out that he had done the same thing in another city to another woman three weeks after breaking into my house. He was charged with “break and enter with intent to commit sexual assault” and “sexual assault” in both cases.

My attacker had very rich relatives who brought in a lawyer from the biggest city in Canada. I was told that his lawyer was one of the highest paid, that he specialized in murder trials and had an amazing win record but no respect amongst his fellow lawyers because of his tactics.

Many people do not believe this but in Canada, third-party records are allowed to be subpoenaed for the victims of sexually-based crimes. This was allowed to happen when changes were made in the laws because of “False Memory Syndrome”. Since part of who I am includes mental health issues, these records included notes from any therapist or counsellor I had ever seen, as well as any and all institutions I had ever visited. Going into the trial, the defence lawyer had copies of my psychiatric files, academic records, financial records, medical records etc. Of course, none of the attacker’s history was available and it was even against the attacker’s rights for the judge or the jury to know about the other charges that happened three weeks after my assault.

Given that it was a strong case against his client, the lawyer’s strategy was to make the case about my mental health. The trial was two days long. The first day was filled with
arguing motions. I was on the witness stand for the most of that second day. I was in a little room alone and a court officer would escort me to and from the courtroom. This happened several times. It was really difficult and draining but the thing I remember most clearly was how much compassion I kept feeling for the attacker’s father. As the day progressed, his shoulders, back and neck slumped more and more, as if he was being physically beaten. In the late afternoon, I was allowed to go home but then was called back in. The judge believed me but saw where the trial was heading. He didn’t want me leaving the court without anything so a decision was made to withdraw the charges in exchange for a three-year peace bond. I thought the ordeal was over.

The next day the headline on the front-page of the paper was “Alternate personality wanted sex: lawyer; Woman said none of her personalities consented, but rape trial stops after testimony.” I was never in the courtroom when the lawyer said that! I phoned the newspaper and the conversation went something like this...

Me: There is an article in today’s paper that is concerning me and I would like to talk to someone about it.

Paper: What story is it concerning?

Me: Alternate Personality wan...

Paper: (cutting me off) The headlines are decided by committee, no one person decides the headlines
**Me:** Umm...okay but that wasn’t what I was going to say.

**Paper:** what did you want to say?

**Me:** That article refers to me. The man who raped me was on trial yesterday (I am crying now) and I want to give you a news tip. That same man will be going to trial on similar charges in another jurisdiction and I want your paper to send your reporter to that trial and then think about what if anything yesterday had to do with mental illness.

**Paper:** Other charges? That didn’t come out yesterday.

**Me:** Maybe that is the real story people need to hear. That it was against his rights for even the judge or jury to know that three weeks after breaking into my house he broke into another woman’s house and raped her, too.

**Paper:** Then we probably aren’t allowed to disclose it either. We will look into it. Thanks for calling. (He sounded really uncomfortable)

The next day I was still pretty shaky but decided to get out of my house. While I was on a bus, I heard two young women talking about the newspaper article. Of course they didn’t know who I was or how deeply I was affected when they shared with each other in agreement that if they were raped
they wouldn’t report it. When I got off the bus one of those women was nearby. I approached her and introduced myself and let her know I was sad about what I had overheard of their conversation and why.

After talking to that young woman, I knew that I needed do something. That last thing I wanted my experience to do was to encourage women to be afraid to speak. I called the paper again. When I let the person know who I was their response was “didn’t you talk to an Editor yesterday?”

I let them know that I was calling this time to find out about how to write a letter to the editor. I also wanted to find out how it would work considering their policy to only publish letters in which the writer is identified when they were not legally allowed to publish my name. I let them know that I would be bringing a letter in. My neighbour helped me to write the letter. I took the letter down to the newspaper in person. I took picture id with me and asked the person to look at me and the id so that they knew that I was who I said I was.

My letter to the editor was published and I am still very proud of it.
Who's Caring for Whom?
By Alice Carey

The word “CANCER” has a unique meaning for me. It means a devastating belief that, “I am an absolutely awful, uncaring, unloving daughter who is therefore an unlovable person.” For the past eighteen years, any time I have heard or read the word, “cancer,” that is what I have heard in my head and felt in every atom of me. Unexpectedly, a new friendship is finally starting to change that perception.

My husband and I moved from Vancouver to Guelph in 1982. It was a long time before we felt able to return to visit family. For one thing, I was pregnant at the time. Also, we did not have money for travel for many years. Initially that was because I stayed home to look after the kids until the younger one was kindergarten age, so all of our money went to paying off the mortgage. When the kids were school age, we spent it all on putting our kids through French Immersion and Suzuki String School. Between 1982 and 1996, we went back west to visit my mum, dad and brother in West Vancouver -- once. Mum and Dad came to visit us four or five times.

I should have suggested we take longer to pay off our mortgage so we would have money to visit my family. I should have insisted I could at least go west on my own. However, I had difficulty with emotion-packed decisions. My husband was always certain of his decisions, so I followed his lead. He did not say, “You should go,” so I didn’t. Wrong choice. Since he always
knows his own mind, he probably thought, “If she really wanted to go, she would just go.”

My Grandmother died of colon cancer in the second half of 1995. It was a sudden death. I gathered much later that the signs were there - giant bloated belly and loss of appetite - but nobody in the family knew they were “The Signs” then. Grandmother got ill, went into the hospital for tests, and died, all in the space of 24 hours. I was 3000 miles away at the time.

Mum got a diagnosis of colon cancer herself in mid-January 1996, just a few months later. I immediately flew back west to visit. She napped every afternoon, but read novel after novel in the mornings and late afternoons and chuckled over TV shows with me in the evenings. She was normal, given the circumstances. The doctors removed a golf ball-sized obstruction in early February and spoke earnestly about the course of chemo treatments they had planned for her. She returned to the safety of the old family stucco-and-wood-siding homestead.

Life was normal -- better than normal, for we had had a narrow escape. The danger was over. Surely, if she were in danger, someone would have told me, “You have to stay!” I was convinced she was going to be perfectly all right, but still I waffled, wondering if I should stay longer in Vancouver. After all, I did not get to see my Vancouver family that often. In the end, I made the bloody stupid decision to return to my Guelph family in early February.
My first day back at work, a couple of co-workers said, “We didn’t think we’d see you again for a long time. We figured you’d want to stay with your mum as long as possible.” Oh. Although my family had not been clear on the point, it was obvious my coworkers knew I had made the wrong decision. Their words echoed in my head, “As long as possible, as long as possible…”

Mum died a couple of weeks later, on February 17, 1996, tangled in a mass of green thermal blankets. She slipped away in the wee hours, alone in her private hospital room in North Vancouver, while I slept snug in my own home in Guelph. Her heart gave out; it just stopped. The cancer and surgery ordeal had been too much for it.

My brother John phoned with the news while I was doing laundry. During my gasps for air between screaming and bawling, he commented, “It was a surprise to the doctors as well. They’d been thinking she had months or years to go.” After he hung up, I looked down. A pair of red panties lay atop the “whites” pile. It seemed to flow and spread like a puddle of blood. I grabbed it up and threw it on the purple and red pile, screaming at it as if it were to blame.

I flew back west to help with the funeral and memorial arrangements, but a little voice in my head kept saying, “You’re too late. You’re too bloody late.” While we were planning, I asked John, “Was there was some way we could have been prepared for this shock?”
He answered, “Well, Dad and I could sort of tell. She had the swollen belly, just like Grandma.” I couldn’t speak. I wanted to scream at him, “Well, if you knew this was coming, why the hell didn’t you tell me? Or get Mum to a doctor a lot sooner?” I looked away, feeling both guilty and resentful.

Upon my return to work this time, I kept saying, “It happened so fast". A helpful co-worker gently shook her head, saying, “Yeah, but the doctors ALWAYS give a prognosis that’s way longer than they’re really thinking. They want to give the patient some hope.” Why couldn’t she have let me in on that secret before? Everyone seemed to know all about cancer but me.

It was a few months after this that I was diagnosed as having Bipolar II with Seasonal Pattern. In other words, I get hypomania in summer and moderate depression all winter, and I cannot take antidepressants for the depression because they make me hypomanic. I started the frustrating journey of regular visits to a psychiatrist, with the accompanying delightful spin-the-dial game of “Which Drug Works for You?” Five years later we’d found the one that helped me cope with Ontario winters with the least awful side effects -- or so I thought.

In December 2004 or January 2005, my Dad learned his prostate cancer had returned after twenty years in remission. I flew to Vancouver to take care of him in February; I was there for eight weeks. The oncologist said Dad would live another six to twelve months. Again, lacking the ordinary decision-making skills that “normal” people have, I believed the doctor;
however, this time, I made a mental note to assume the shorter end of his range. We had six months to work with. That would bring us to September.

At the end of March, I found myself heartily missing my Guelph family, especially since I did not have my S.A.D. lamp with me, and Vancouver in early spring tends to be grey and rainy. It felt like the deepest, darkest winter. In addition, my psychiatrist had added an antidepressant to my usual medication just before I left for Vancouver. Every time I forgot a dose of the antidepressant - and I forgot 2-4 times a week - I found myself bawling in the bathroom for three hours later in the day, knowing the world was about to end. I so needed warm cuddles from my husband and kids. I suppose I had not really been in shape to nurse someone else, given that I was having trouble nursing myself, but what can you do? When your father might have less than a year to live, you have to do something. However, once the doctor said Dad had another six months, I decided to return to Guelph, just for a week or so, to see my family and get my life in order.

My father went into tachycardia the day after I left. The very next day. I re-packed my suitcase and returned to West Vancouver. Dad died 3 days later, on April 5, 2005, never having regained consciousness since the tachycardia dragged him under.

My first thought? I killed my father! I left him with only homecare nurses and caregivers and my brother, who had to work. Worst, stupid decision of my life! The shock of being
alone that first night pitched Dad headlong into tachycardia, and that was the end. I...KILLED...MY...FATHER.

I do not remember if I even cried after Dad died. Certainly, I did not have hysterics the way I did after Mum died. My brain had completely shut down. It did not want to think that my leaving had killed Dad. I was numb. I guess somewhere inside, a part of my brain was deciding the new definition for the word “cancer” was “a disgusting person who can’t manage to ‘be there’ for her parents.”

After my dad’s memorial service, I quit my job. Maybe I should have asked for a year’s bereavement leave, but I did not think of that. My fight or flight impulses were roaring at me, “Get out of there!” So, I ran.

I saw my psychiatrist, complained to him that I could not feel proper grief about my dad. He nodded in that ‘Interested-Psychiatrist-Earnestly-Listening-To-Patient’ way and told me, “That’s probably a side effect of the drug you’re on.”

My answer? Dead silence. I was too busy screaming inside. “Say what?! Can’t he hear the implosion in my head? Oh yeah, that’s just a side effect. I’ve seen it before. You’ll never see your father again, you killed him and you aren’t bothered as much as you think you should be. Oh well. Que sera, sera”.

I quit the effing drug that night. I quit the effing doctor that day too.
Soon after, I learned my neighbour, someone I had spent some time with in the past, had discovered her breast cancer had returned and it was now metastatic. I could not deal with this new information. Every time I thought about her, I freaked. I have never been to visit her since then. I would tell myself, “You really should visit her, you know,” and the next minute I would have a massive anxiety attack. She might even be dying now; but what can I say to her at this point? I would make her uncomfortable if I stammered my way into her house at this point.

Every time the subject of cancer came up I heard the message, “You are an awful, uncaring, unloving daughter, and therefore an unlovable person.”

I have finally realized guilt was not the only emotion I have felt since Mum and Dad died. Denial and resentment have also been churning inside me for years. Years and years. **HOW could my mum have died when I had only seen her a total of maybe ten weeks since we’d moved to Guelph?! Ten weeks! How could my Dad have died when I had only seen him, maybe a total of sixteen weeks in twenty-three years? How, how, HOW?! It’s not possible.** In both cases, in my mind, only weeks had passed. I knew I was being a petulant child, but I could not shake myself of the feeling. **It’s not fair! I want those missed years back!** I haven’t been able to get past all the denial, guilt and resentment ever since.

I do not know what has shifted this past year, but something has changed. I have another friend who has cancer
now, and I am able to visit her. The terror of being with someone with cancer is leaving me. The need to help and connect with others is overpowering it. Carcinophobia, the fear of cancer, is gone when I am with her. I have helped her with her hoarding problems. We have gone out for lunch. I have taken her for hospital tests and treatments. We talk about all sorts of topics, including cancer. Maybe it should feel surreal because my cancer-paralysis is suddenly missing. Instead, it feels like I am just a friend helping a friend.

Is Time healing me? Has going back on drugs - at a lower dose - convinced my subconscious mind I am not the monster I thought I was, or made me open to other possibilities? I joined in on activities with Spark of Brilliance this past year. Has journaling and doing art projects with other people who are living with mental illnesses helped me? They all seem so much more at home with their faults than I am. Maybe that has helped me forgive myself. Somewhere, somehow, healing must have occurred.

Since my father died in 2005, I have only had occasional temporary jobs. I have actually been terrified to apply for jobs; the few interviews I got gave me horrendous anxiety attacks. My brain completely froze up in an interview for one job, so I could not even answer questions. When I did get jobs, I found the noise and chaos terrifying. I did not know what to do to earn money. I got to the point where I thought the effort of trying to find a job was worse than struggling with a lot less money.
But now? The week after I first took my friend to the hospital, I also found a job -- without looking for it. I was feeling pretty pleased with myself that day. ‘Competent’: that’s the word. I felt competent again. I just spoke up and asked a group I was with if any of them had any jobs available. Bing, bang, whammo, I was employed. It’s only freelance piecework, but I am earning more than I was five months ago.

It is as if guilt had paralyzed me, made me ineffectual in all parts of my life. If I could not be a supportive person for someone I loved, I was good for nothing. Now I am re-learning how to be supportive of others, so I can finally be supportive of myself.

Whatever the cause, I feel as if my friend is doing more for me than I am for her. I guess it’s fitting that cancer, the thing that convinced me I was unlovable and incompetent, is the thing which is now teaching me I’m not.
Pain, trauma, grief, depression, anxiety are like a huge black shadow with no social skills. It sits down right beside you, touching you - you move farther away and it again, sits right next to you. You are afraid of it, terrified of it and are scared if you acknowledge it or touch it - it will swallow you whole, greedily and with maniacal laughter. So you run from it - in your mind or for real. You search desperately for something to help, aid, ease the pain. But, it is like searching in a dark house that is not yours, and at the same time, not knowing what you are looking for, only that it is something important, desperate - like a crying, starving baby. You sweep the contents of the cupboard, but hurt yourself in the process. You stumble around until you realize you have been eaten up already, that is why it is dark. You are frantic and nothing is recognizable and you are not in control. Touching the pain pokes holes in it until you can climb out and observe it in the sunlight. Journaling, touching the pain, helps free me.
Why am I So Scared to Live?
By Lisa Lindsay

Life has always scared me to death. Getting out of bed in the morning to face the day is quite the task as I summon the courage to live, as I look through my dark tinted glasses of fear that I use to filter the world. I wear fear like an identity in my life. I almost want to say that it’s who I am. Life has always felt foreign to me, like I am visiting earth for a vacation and will be returning any day now to where I truly belong.

In some ways, I am less afraid of death than I am of life. Well, this is partially true. In living with suicidal thoughts and depression, death has become a dear friend. Death is someone who is there for me when the world is not and I am feeling all alone. The irony is that I live with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder so somewhere inside me knows the fear of coming close to death and wants to avoid it at all costs. If I don’t live then I won’t die. If I’m not caught out there frolicking in life, enjoying myself then there’s nothing to take away, nothing to lose and nothing to die from. Dissociate away from all that is and there’s no need to live. This is quite the full occupancy in this body of mine. The war of living and dying rages on. Whose team do I cheer for in here? Where do I begin to heal?

Fear often feels bigger than me. I don’t know why I live with so much fear about what feels like everything. Maybe I inherited these dark glasses from my parents? Maybe it’s an active imagination? Or maybe it’s due to my painfully sensitive nature? I did also have a very bumpy childhood living with a
parent with mental illness and a parent who didn’t know how to cope. So there have been many scary events and little support or understanding of the situations, but why did I develop a fear complex when others can move on?

There is no definable moment for me to examine. Nothing to say “Ah this is it. Fix this and you are home free.” There is just this underlying dread and knowledge that my life was at risk. My life had been threatened enough, thus PTSD resulted and its pals anxiety and depression have become my companions. It’s not just a feeling that comes and goes. It feels like this constant vibration that is sometimes more in the background and sometimes up front and centre. I crave safety like an addict. When I am safe then I will be happy, then I will focus on how I want to live. I have learned to be more mindful about this moment and if I’m seeing more clearly, to notice I am safe in 2014, so this must be a part within me stuck in trauma time that is up and speaking for all to hear. This poem speaks of the relationship I have with my inner world and its fear.

_Let the Fear Speak_

Shivers and tingles ignite my body.
It’s here again.
The stomach tightens
Bracing against the next oncoming wave.
Thoughts scatter randomly
In distraction
As defence
Please not again
It refuses to be contained
As the black cloud grows larger from within
It encompasses all within its presence.
No longer being felt. It is now feeling me.
Let the fear speak.
Terror trembles up the spine
At the very mention of its presence
To face this cloaked ally
Unimaginable
In this frozen place
Let the fear speak
As everything crumbles beneath its weight
Listening for courage
I summon myself
Slowly
Shaking
I step into the cloud
Into myself
Unexpectedly, there is power here
And gentleness
Acknowledged, fear begins to flow
No longer solid and all-encompassing
Frozen in time I am bound
Stepping into this moment
Fear speaks
Free again for now
A voice unleashed
Now heard.
As I allow fear to guide me through life, I find myself searching for a formula by which to live: a formula that will bring safety and happiness to my life. The rules of right and wrong have provided such a structure. ‘Shoulds’ and ‘supposed tos’ have become my mantras, as I chant them daily to avoid making conscious choices. I try to avoid rocking the boat and making ripples with these rules. Mark Nepo writes of how we all make ripples as a result of being alive and part of an interdependent web. Yet I have conditioned myself into believing no ripples are right ripples. I have become scared to let go into myself due to these ‘shoulds’ and right/wrong filters. I have looked outside of myself in order to find safety, life and even me. Mindfulness has taught me of another way. A way that exists in the here and now. As I desperately desire change from these old ways, they cling to me like a belt that is pulled three holes too tight, squeezing the Lisa right out of me. How can I advocate from such a position for myself to live life, for a space to exist from such a position? How can I let go into this moment, now?

I have always wanted my own personal counsel or spokesperson to walk along beside me, creating pools of safety along way to dive into and refresh as I need. Someone to smother me with compassion and say “yay Lisa!” for all my many mini courageous acts that are required of me to get through the day living in this black cloud. The same acts that I judge myself for and criticize should not be required from a normal person that is not terrified of her own shadow. “Yay, you called and booked a doctor appointment!” “Yay, you went
into the busy grocery store”. “Yay, you stayed alive today”. I will jump in and advocate for a stray animal or step in and save a spider (of which I am terrified) from a ‘stepping on’ to be escorted outside, but using my voice for myself that’s just crazy. That’s called living and then I’m back full circle to feeling scared to death!

The funny thing is that there is a little spark within me, though now so faint in the darkness that is still speaking to me. Its little whisper is what tops my bucket list. I want to be able to say that I lived before I die. Selfishly, I want to say it many times. To live is to be able to stop and truly feel that really deep sense of presence inside that allows me to act genuinely, to love openly and to be vulnerable and take the risk to live. I want to risk using my voice and risk losing that which I hold dear. I want to allow myself to come to the surface and see the world through my own fresh eyes, not through how I’ve been told things are and through filters of past and fear. I want to create and play and have fun. I want to risk letting go, even just a little. I want to swim in the grief of what I have lost already in order to acknowledge a life that has been lived, even if I was disconnected from it at the time. I want to acknowledge the pain that was never seen. The grief of impermanence to be felt that is actually life itself. As vibrant and as alive as life feels it is an unholdable stream of impermanence. I am exhausted from resisting its flow with “the rules” and “the shoulds”. I want to open to uncertainty and risk death. I want to risk living.

Right here with this baby step I begin. With each word I have written I have used my voice, risked ridicule and admitted
I do exist and I do have dreams. I am admitting to the world but more so to myself that I live in fear when I think that I shouldn’t and that others don’t. I often have let fear have the upper hand in my life and have handed over my power to this emotion. My shame is on this page for me to see. I vulnerably admit that I am not living a full or perfect life as I am often stagnated by fear. It just is, when I risk putting it on the table and seeing it. I don’t need to analyze “why” in order to change it, make sense of it or to understand why my path is different from others. Or even why it is different from how I wish it to be.

In living with dissociation, I often have the sensation of things and the world around me feeling unreal. In taking the risk of using my voice and acknowledging how I feel I do feel just a little more real. I took the risk and showed up to this moment writing my truth versus the one I was taught or the one I thought I should live or the one I would like have other people thinking I am living. I have written my own. With being just a little more here, Lisa’s space seems to grow just a little bit more.

I have realized in attempting to form this bucket list of mine that I want to know love before I die. This I am guessing now, may involve taking a risk to embrace the fear in my life in order to make space for love. Maybe by acknowledging fear, feeling it and getting up each morning allowing it to flow through me and still face the day is love?! 

When I sat down to write, we were asked if we had any challenging situations we have overcome and it occurs to me
that being me is a challenging situation in itself! Another challenging situation has been facing myself and writing this piece from my heart. To be able to summon the courage (and non-judgemental attitude) to do so I would label as challenging! Another piece of information we were given is that when we are writing we are always working towards the unknown. I love this outlook as it keeps me writing one word and one space at a time. I can only be in the now to do this. It’s “supposed to” be that way. Maybe then I can live this little piece of guidance as what it is to live my life. Not to have myself wrapped up in the outcome or interpretation of what it could or should be, just one word and one space at a time, enjoying the flow of it and the joy of each word and each space. To enjoy the thrill inside as each hits the paper.

I still don’t have the answer to why am I so scared to live? I am slowly gaining the patience and acceptance to live with the question. I may never know the answer and may not need to know if I can live more openly with fear and the unknown. To allow space for the unknown to exist with its uncertainty, pain, joy and unanswered questions. Maybe I don’t need to know in order to live a good life or even not to be scared in life. As I write into the unknown of the ending of this essay these following words sit within my heart.

Exposed

Who am I to need a happy ending to define my life?
To fill my eulogy with important items of interest
Explaining to the world that I was here and it’s a shame that
I’m gone
Defining who I am so that others will know that I matter
What is true right now?
Awakened to see the petals hold the raindrops like tears
Inviting me to cry from the heart
Exposing myself in vulnerability
In the genuineness of now
Not caring how others may interpret me
Not concealing the truth of myself any longer
With control and image
For the benefit of others
A falling open of sorts
Into an unknown emptiness full of wholeheartedness
Relinquishing my trying
My trying to know...
Trying to live
Trying not to be afraid
Trying not to try
Trying not to be who I already am
Grieve the loss of knowing an outcome
To accept what truly is right now
I can only speak my truth, not that of others
Pleasant or unpleasant
I can call this real
Before it fades into the impermanence that is “my life”
Then so be it.

I am truly grateful to have had the opportunity to write this and to have had the chance to find a voice, my voice and
witness myself using it. I was hoping that I could write a happy ending to this story and my search, but the outcome is still unknown to me right now. I choose to sit with that. What I can say is that I have been in the depths of muck with myself, and I’m sure that I will be again. This too shall pass as I continue to step into this moment, uncertain of life but facing it one small step at a time as I take each one. Allowing whatever questions that ‘right now’ may hold, to be. Taking the risk to allow myself to be in the picture and letting life hold me rather than resisting it (at least some of the time). Listening intently for that little spark that seems to be there in each moment no matter how dark it is, listening for life, for my voice.