First Person Account:
Self-Stigmatization

by Kathleen M. Gallo

The article that follows is part of the Schizophrenia Bulletin's ongoing First Person Accounts series. We hope that mental health professionals—the Bulletin's primary audience—will take this opportunity to learn about the issues and difficulties confronted by consumers of mental health care. In addition, we hope that these accounts will give patients and families a better sense of not being alone in confronting the problems that can be anticipated by persons with serious emotional difficulties. We welcome other contributions from patients, ex-patients, or family members. Our major editorial requirement is that such contributions be clearly written and organized, and that a novel or unique aspect of schizophrenia be described, with special emphasis on points that will be important for professionals. Clinicians who see articulate patients, with experiences they believe should be shared, might encourage these patients to submit their articles to First Person Accounts, Division of Clinical and Treatment Research, NIMH, 5600 Fishers Lane, Rm. 18C-06, Rockville, MD 20857.—The Editors.

While we all know that stigmatization of the mentally ill exists and that it is always harmful, there is a kind of stigma that is actually more damaging than that inflicted by others. It is the all-too-real process and phenomenon of "self-stigmatization" whereby mentally ill individuals torture themselves to an extent that exceeds what they suffer from the very worst that society-at-large can dish out to them.

By way of illustration, I will attempt to describe how I dealt with such an overwhelmingly negative self-image by sharing with the reader some personal life events—both concrete and psychological—that resulted from my having experienced an acute psychotic episode. Have I ever incurred a more specific diagnosis? Definitely! In fact, I managed to accumulate at least half a dozen different diagnoses, and so the only apparent truth is that late in 1985 I experienced an acute psychotic episode.

This episode led to my first (and only, to date) psychiatric hospitalization. Therefore, at the age of 40 years, I heard myself being referred to as a "chronically mentally ill" individual, that is, just another "CMI." This was news to me, and the impact of its implications had an almost totally catastrophic effect upon me! I will cite a few pertinent instances in which I inflicted unnecessary pain upon myself because of self-stigmatization.

When I first joined Fountain House, a psychosocial rehabilitation facility, early in January 1986, I was in hiding from everyone. I perceived myself, quite accurately, unfortunately, as having a serious mental illness and therefore as having been relegated to what I called "the social garbage heap." Accordingly, from 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., 5 days a week, I could hide from the cruelty of social stigmatization by being within Fountain House. At all other times, however, especially when I was not in my house, I tortured

Reprint requests should be sent to Ms. K.M. Gallo, 16-06 212th St., Bayside, NY 11360-1527.
myself with the persistent and repetitive thought that people I would encounter, even total strangers, did not like me and wished that mentally ill people like me did not exist.

Thus, I would do things such as standing away from others at bus stops and hiding and cringing in the far corners of subway cars. Thinking of myself as garbage, I would even leave the sidewalk in what I thought of as exhibiting the proper deference to those above me in social class. The latter group, of course, included all other human beings.

Such examples illustrate the severe harm I had suffered. However, I now fully realize that the damage I had inflicted upon myself via self-stigmatization was due to the fact that I fully believed my thoughts were true!

Although the Fountain House environment helped me to overcome this severe psychological handicap, it took years of intense internal struggling. Thankfully, I have been largely victorious in this psychological battle within myself.

Returning to school meant changing jobs because of travel time factors. Thus, my next job consisted of working the 4:00 p.m. to midnight shift at a local convenience store, which, especially on Saturday nights, often meant working until 2:00 a.m. without overtime pay (I did not care because I felt lucky to be employed).

I also enrolled in another group dynamics class where, of course, a participant will derive little or no benefit unless he or she is willing and able to engage in self-disclosure. This often involves revealing intimate details of one’s personal, inner life. Thus, I told my fellow group members much about my mental illness—my experiences with it, how I felt about it, and what I thought my future would be like.

Still, did I cure myself of thinking poorly of myself because of this very considerable victory? I believe you know the answer by now is a resounding “No!” It definitely helped, but I was not cured, nor will I ever be cured of all the very insidious and multitudinous aspects of self-stigmatization. Nevertheless, the more battles I win, the more I can enjoy being alive. I am referring to life satisfaction and the quality of my life.

For instance, I no longer feel that my neighbors dislike and disapprove of me. I now realize that they perceived me as being standoffish and rejecting of them because of my own self-imposed exclusive behaviors.

After several months at Fountain House, I went to work at my first Transitional Employment Program (TEP) job. As with any Fountain House TEP job, my coworkers knew of my mental illness. Thus, from the start I was accepted by all of them, as they were accustomed to members of Fountain House coming and going at this job. But, after I had proved to them that I would not only do my share of the work but would always help them out whenever they had an overload, they repeatedly told me how much they liked and appreciated me.

Therefore, after having been at this job for 8 months, one would think, especially in light of all my coworkers’ positive regard, that I would have formed a better opinion of myself and the world in which I moved. But I most emphatically had not!

Even though I was in a self-deprecating frame of mind, I was angry enough at my perceived place at the bottom of the social garbage heap to decide to go out on my own. It did not hurt that my older son’s best friend had been working in a home furnishings store for several years and was close with the store manager. Personally, even with this “in,” I did not think that I would actually be hired. I went to the job interview thinking that I had absolutely nothing more to lose and, therefore, I was stunned when the manager told me that I was hired.

And here is where I feel that my road to independence diverges from that of most others with a major mental illness, for here is where I first began to fight an all-out war against my paranoia and other fearful and/or bizarre ideas, my feelings of worthlessness, and my former conviction that I would always be a highly dependent person. I waged this war not because I am so brave but because I absolutely had to in order to keep my job. A few mere words cannot possibly convey to the reader both the intensity and the persistence of the pain I underwent in the process of fighting these inner battles.

It was a good thing that I did not fully realize this at the time, or I might not have found the fortitude to go on with it, for I reminded you again that I am not an unusually brave person. What gave me the drive to fight for my own life was how much I hated the rigid restrictions of poverty and other painful aspects of mental illness and the consequent stigmatization. I knew I could not change the collective mind of society, but I vowed to overcome the overwhelmingly negative effects of self-stigmatization, for I was acutely aware of how terribly narrow and limited choices can be when one passively accepts self-
stigmatization. I was determined to get myself out of it somehow or die trying.

A year later, I wished to return to college for my degree in psychology. I reasoned that once armed with a degree, maybe, just maybe, I could aim for a better job and become financially independent.

But because of inadequate public transportation in my neighborhood, I knew that I had to climb one of the highest mountains in my life. Namely, I would have to get my driver's license, and the peak of this particular mountain was the formidable and dreaded road test!

While many people find the road test traumatic, my thinking and behavior was rather rigid at the time and, as a new driver, I experienced a great deal of awkwardness and disabling anxiety when trying to handle a car I was driving for the first time. Thus, although I had paid extra for the unquestionable advantage of taking the road test in the same car in which I had practiced for it, the only thing the two cars had in common was the color red. On the morning of the big day, I passed the time by ironing my children's clothes.

In due time, the driving instructor showed up in that alien red car, and I discovered when he drove us to the secret site of the road test that I had been awarded the area of quiet side streets immediately adjacent to Creedmoor State Hospital! How fitting, I thought to myself. As we had arrived an hour early, I lost count of how many cigarettes and Hershey's kisses I consumed in what seemed like the longest hour of my life.

Then, sitting on the curb, my thinking changed. I told myself that I had not gone through all the anxiety, fear, and pain just to have it all go for naught by failing my road test. Well, I pulled myself together and, not only did I pass that darn test, but I earned a perfect score for not making any errors. However, once again, I did not know that the war was not over; no, not by a long shot was it over. In reality, it was just beginning, but I was mercifully unaware of this as my children and I celebrated my victory.

Enjoying life is not possible if you do not believe that you even have a right to exist, let alone consider improving your self-esteem, which, in my experience, is one of most therapists' favorite topics. I have also learned an extremely important fact. It is imperative that the patient/client/consumer be cognizant of the absence of self-esteem and be able to express it to his or her therapist before any meaningful change in psychological status can occur.

Before my hospitalization, I had no real understanding of this fact. I realize only now, in retrospect, how terrifyingly close I had once been to committing suicide.

Although this could be a good place to end this article, in order to emphasize the main point that life's battles are never "all over and done with" (as some mentally ill individuals tend to believe can happen), I want to describe one more aspect of my personal fight with the fallout from self-stigmatization. Yes, I passed my driver's test and my children got me a car. Well, for a full 6 months after that, I went through absolute hell—intensive, unmerciful, and unremitting self-torture. I found that driving was a nightmarish, exhausting experience because I simply could not help being riddled with extreme anxiety. I would look for approval of my driving ability and skill from the person in the car behind me. Instead of being a positive source of information about traffic conditions immediately behind me, my sick use of the rearview mirror was a source of torment.

This may strike you as comical; even I can laugh at it now. But at the time I found driving so terrifying that I looked forward to red lights so that I could stop to get some rest, and I often wished that those red lights were longer. Obviously, most "normal" drivers here on planet Earth do not enjoy having to stop for red lights and these days neither do I.

Yes, it does indeed have a funny side. But it also has a deadly serious aspect to it. In order to write this article, I have had to look back, and thinking about all that I have had to endure because of self-stigmatization has caused me to relive much of the pain all over again, albeit in a relatively minor way. Even the horrid phenomenon of looking in the rearview mirror for a sick reason recurred to a mild degree. Therein lies the main point I wish to elucidate: once I win a battle, especially one that is big and tough, even though I may have to go through it all over again, it is never, but never, nearly as hard to fight as it was the first time. For me, this is a major source of satisfaction, contentment, and a true sense of self-esteem and overall well-being. This is so despite the fact that, before my psychiatric hospitalization, when I could no longer withstand the pain of being alive and I had, in fact, almost committed suicide, my life now, without qualification, is definitely worth living.
Finally, I simply wish to state that I am alive and well and I recognize the signs of the need to push myself forward once again. However, no one, including myself, can yet predict in what direction I may grow, what changes I may make, and so forth.

Am I scared of what lies ahead? Yes, but I have learned that it is well worth confronting fears head-on and coping with them, for it means that I am in control of my own life by making my own decisions and selecting my own choices out of the plethora of options life offers me—indeed, that life offers all of us, if only we can open our eyes wide enough to see them.

In conclusion, after all the struggling I have done on my road to independence, I am now accepting enough of myself, and know and like myself well enough, to be able to encounter failure without its having the catastrophic effect it once inevitably had on me. I now understand that failure does not mean that I am worthless. Rather, it is an indication that I too am a human being and, as such, I will occasionally experience failure along with the many successes on the road of my life.

The Author

Kathleen M. Gallo, B.A., majored in psychology, is a member of Psi Chi, the National Honor Society in Psychology, and received Deans' Awards in both psychology and anthropology at Queens College, City University of New York. For the past 5 years, she has been working as a law librarian. She is also a freelance writer and, for almost 7 years, has consistently performed a variety of writing, editing, and other assignments for Fountain House, Inc., New York, NY. She currently serves as a member of the Program Committee of the Board of Directors of Fountain House. In addition, the American Poetry Association has published her work, and she enjoys writing short stories. Eventually, she would like to earn her living as a writer.