First Person Account:
Schizoaffective Disorder and Suicide

by Allyson Varina Ribar

The article that follows is part of the Schizophrenia Bulletin’s ongoing First Person Account 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 their families a better sense of not being alone when confronting the problems that can be anticipated by persons with serious emotional difficulties. —The Editors.

The first time I tried to kill myself I was about twenty-two. I had gone through the cupboards trying to find whatever pills I could. I wasn’t thinking rationally. I only took a few pills from each container so that nobody would think I killed myself. I guess I didn’t think that the dead body of a healthy young woman would make them suspicious. The bottles I found were not prescription drugs but over-the-counter stuff: cough and cold pills and headache remedies. I took 30 pills and went to bed hoping to never wake up. But I did wake up and I woke up nauseous.

After I finished vomiting, I had to decide what to do. I was terribly disappointed that I had not succeeded in killing myself. I wanted to do it, but I didn’t know how. The pill thing didn’t work so well for me; I had no access to a gun; and there were no tall buildings or bridges nearby. I felt hopeless and worthless. I got myself dressed and went out in search of the mental health clinic that I knew was in my town. The first place I looked yielded no results. It was a general health clinic. I didn’t think to ask the receptionist where the mental health clinic was. As I said, I wasn’t thinking rationally at all. Thinking back on it now, help was within my reach, but I was so hopeless and discouraged feeling that I just didn’t know where to look. I could have asked just about anyone for help or looked the address up in the phonebook, but I didn’t. I had given up in every sense of the word and had not the strength to do even the simplest thing.

Eventually my path crossed with someone who could help me and recognized that I needed help even though I did not ask. I got to the mental health clinic and got the help I needed. I saw a psychiatrist and was diagnosed with schizoaffective disorder. The next couple of months were a blur for me. I was in and out of the hospital, trying different drugs and getting diagnostic tests like CT scans. The worst feeling in the world is to know that your brain is malfunctioning. You can’t trust your own senses and emotions. I had enough knowledge to know that I had a serious problem that was not going to just go away. Ironically, I was a Bachelor of Arts student in my third year of studies in psychology when I was diagnosed.

The second time I tried to kill myself was after a night of festivities with my friends. I was drunk and feeling sorry for myself. When you are depressed, alcohol can seem like a good way to escape, but it is a depressant. At the time I was being prescribed prescription sleeping pills. I took all that I had and went to bed, once again hoping to never wake up. But wake up I did, this time in a hospital bed with my Dad hovering nervously around me. Apparently, when I did not wake up to get ready for work, Dad came into my bedroom to wake me. I wouldn’t wake up. He called the ambulance, and the next thing I remember is waking up in the hospital with a bottle of activated charcoal beside me and a security guard telling me to drink up. The charcoal binds with the poison in your digestive tract and passes harmlessly through your system. It doesn’t taste good, and I vomited repeatedly.

The third time, I never made the attempt but called one of my university professors for help. She talked me out of the attempt for the time being. At the present, I am as well as I can be. I still take antipsychotics and antidepressants but I can appreciate the good things in my life: a hug from my father, a good cup of coffee, and the companionship of friends. But still, in the back of my mind, I have a way out, an escape. I am still prescribed sleeping pills, but for now I take them as prescribed. I don’t know if I will ever be free of the specter of suicide. Every day is a small battle for me. I have my good days and my bad days. At least now, I am more aware that there is help out there for me when I need it, but suicide ideation is still a part of my life, thankfully a small part. One day, I hope to be rid of clinical depression and schizoaffective disorder for good.

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