

Kenneth's Story

Background:

Kenneth is a 28-year-old young man, born in Canada to immigrant parents. He describes his childhood as "ok," yet his life growing up with his parents and younger brother was stressful. Kenneth's parents have been struggling through relationship turmoil for years, and he was exposed to both emotional and physical abuse brought about by his father. Kenneth was an average student throughout his early school years, although some concerns were raised early on by his father regarding his failure to concentrate, hyperactivity and his apparent lack of discipline. Nonetheless, Kenneth worked hard through high school to get into university, maintaining an A average.

Knowing that he wanted to become a teacher from early on, Kenneth's goals were set, and he appeared to be on his way, but he eventually realized that he was confused about his educational and career direction. Kenneth was hesitant in high school to speak with a guidance counselor and ask for help, and so went ahead to university feeling somewhat lost in a puzzled haze.

Thus, the transition from high school to university was confusing and difficult for Kenneth for multiple reasons, which he still has difficulty identifying and sorting out. He had many good friends at the time who were going through the same transition, yet he noticed that he seemed to struggle more than them. Kenneth did speak to his friends about some of the troubles he was having, but a deeper issue that continued to bother him was the ever-increasing communication problems with his parents, particularly his father. Kenneth often retreated to the family when problems surfaced, yet he was unable to connect with his father in a way he would have liked. When asked about his relationship with his mother, Kenneth's response belies a stark power imbalance in the family; *"my dad does not listen to my mom. He gets angry."* As the situation persisted and he struggled through university, the acceptance, approval and support from his father that Kenneth so yearned for became increasingly unattainable.

One point of tension between Kenneth and his father was the issue of not being allowed to date girls, with a reluctance to go behind his father's back on this rule because of his strong desire for approval. In the following statement, Kenneth responds to the question of why he didn't just do it anyway and not tell his father:

"Yes, I did that but I was getting past that stage to the point where eventually you want your parents ... like I always want my dad to be on my side, I never really... hide anything."

As Kenneth struggled through university, his experiences of unhappiness, confusion and pressure escalated. At this time, Kenneth sought counsel from his father, but as he explains, this attempt to reach out was unsuccessful:

"I was going to speak (to my father) for a little bit but my grades started really suffering. I got more depressed just because he made demands... of me....and I could not meet them. You know he kicked me out of the house and then like I knew I was not getting money for school. It was just too much pressure."

Around the same time, Kenneth started seeing a psychologist. At first he went on his own, and then his father started attending as well. At the time, Kenneth believed that, of the two of them, his father would benefit most from counseling, although the viewpoint of his father was the opposite. This conflict in views was never quite resolved and eventually Kenneth stopped attending. Kenneth describes this experience as unhelpful, and expresses strong feelings about the failure of this process in the following words:

"Nobody really helped that relationship, which is a waste. The way I see it, it's like being robbed of something. I hate it now, just paying for somebody to listen our problem for now and then that's it. You just get an hour of time and nothing comes out of it. So to me it is like robbery. I just wouldn't do it again."

Once in his own apartment, Kenneth's unhappiness with his life intensified as friends were beginning to drift away in the bustle of university life. Eventually, Kenneth found himself without a confidant. At a very low and lonely point at this stage, Kenneth was found wandering the streets by his psychologist and was admitted to hospital for a short time. A few years later, after another falling-out with his father and some attempts at self-harm, Kenneth was hospitalized for six months and put on medication for his depression for the first time. Once out of the hospital, Kenneth was assigned a social worker, which he describes as nothing more than an aggravating nuisance. As a result, his feelings of loneliness and hostility toward others continued to deepen. In particular, Kenneth's feelings towards his father started to sour further, with issues of betrayal and blame surfacing.

Kenneth's view of the mental health system and the care he received remained quite negative at this point. Kenneth describes a situation of miscommunication between himself and his doctor and extreme unhappiness with the weight gain which he attributed to the medication he was prescribed, along with the isolation he continued to experience. Again, conflict between Kenneth and his father emerged around the issue of treatment options, with Kenneth's father voicing great frustration over his inability to control his son's decisions, and Kenneth's

unwillingness to consent to what was deemed by his doctors to be appropriate treatment. Despite Kenneth's longing for meaningful human interaction and obvious desire to maintain relationships with friends and family, he did not want anything to do with the formal mental health system;

"I just didn't want anybody's help, like my parents were forcing me to get help and I didn't want anybody's help and I just want like...please leave me alone."

When probed further about his current life, Kenneth reveals his acute disappointment with the way his life has unfolded in his adult years, particularly with his failure to achieve his educational and career goals and conveys a marked ambivalence about his present mental state. He remains on medication to help manage his depression, and is making steps towards completing his university degree, as he explains in the following;

"I am just looking after the bare minimum right now, disability and stuff [surviving through drawing a disability pension], so I do enough and when bored I just watch TV, I do my school work."

When asked about how services could have helped him, Kenneth's preference is toward support groups and a more open-ended concept to counseling whereby reliance on strict schedules and organization would be minimized. He also emphasizes the need for clients to be kept more informed about what is happening to them, as well as about the kinds of services that are available to them. Kenneth's experiences with mental health services brought on skepticism and reservations about the effectiveness of current treatment approaches, and his overall assessment is not altogether encouraging;

"...it was disappointing to me, I don't have much faith in the system. I know somebody who is going through a hard time and I basically just tell them that all they [professionals] are going to do for you is give you some pills for this problem. And I don't know that this is enough for some people. Like for me it wasn't, that's like the last thing I was looking for."