

Gabriella's Story: Seeking Wellness, Finding Friendship

Background:

Originally from Poland, Gabriella immigrated to Canada with her young son in the early 1990's. Employed as an accountant in Poland, Gabriella describes her life as a young woman as peaceful and quiet. Married life soon changed that scenario, and she eventually decided to flee Poland in order to break away from a failed marriage to an alcoholic.

Once in Canada, Gabriella took on strenuous labour jobs such as cleaning and factory work in order to support herself and her son. Early on she experienced severe anxiety and stress due to her inability to comprehend English combined with trying to keep up with an arduous work schedule far above her physical capabilities. During this time, Gabriella greatly feared losing her job and allowed several workplace injuries to go unreported, which only added to her emotional stress and physical exhaustion.

Problems Surface

While in the midst of trying to juggle the multiple responsibilities of a working single parent in an unfamiliar country, Gabriella began experiencing nervous breakdowns and manic episodes. Although she was able to seek guidance from her brother in Poland over the phone when feeling overwhelmed, Gabriella eventually fell into a deep depression. In essence, as explained by her family counsellor, "*her psychological abilities to cope became exhausted.*"

Seeking Help through Formal Services

Gabriella soon sought help through her family doctor for her mental struggles, and started seeing a massage therapist and chiropractor for physical discomfort. Once referred to a Polish-speaking psychiatrist, in 1995 Gabriella was diagnosed with bi-polar disorder and was put on medication. Over the course of the following 11 years, Gabriella has grappled with keeping her illness under control through constant contact with her trusted psychiatrist, by attending a support group, and through sessions with a family counsellor.

"Currently I see only two doctors, my family doctor and my psychiatrist. I carefully listen to their advice. I don't change doctors. I trust them and this helps in my treatment."

Despite the positive benefits of these services, Gabriella occasionally finds herself unable to cope and ends up in hospital, which is an experience she recounts with

revulsion and dread. In particular, she found the medication-focused approach to care along with a perceived disregard for patients suffering from mental illnesses, dehumanizing.

“There is a total lack of understanding of patients. When I was in hospital they made me feel like I wasn’t even a human...They treated me as if I did not have any understanding of my own self...I felt like a total zero just sitting there and being neglected.”

Beyond the negative experiences of her hospital stays, Gabriella is currently coping with her illness through a combination of self-monitoring, medication, professional support, and through friendships she has built. She has found that prayer and faith have been decidedly helpful throughout her struggles over the years and she aims to divert her tendency to depression through walks, journaling, and busying herself with household tasks.

Finding Stability and Friendship

One of the most important components of Gabriella’s daily routine is maintaining frequent contact with a neighbour with whom she has recently developed a caring friendship. Struggling alone in her own apartment with a mental illness for over 10 years had taken a toll on Gabriella, and although she had managed to get through it as best she could, finding friendship was like a breath of fresh air in her life. This serendipitous bond, according to the neighbour friend, has had a positive affect on Gabriella’s life;

“I have noticed an improvement in her well-being. She tells me I energize her, that as soon as she hears my voice she feels better. As soon as I come home I give her a call and ask her how she is doing. This makes her feel better that someone is actually interested in her and cares about her...I noticed that our friendship has had a positive impact on her.”

Through the help of her friend, who is also Polish, Gabriella has developed a renewed interest in keeping her apartment attractive and tidy, and in arranging the space to suit her tastes. Rather than remaining indifferent to her surroundings, she now finds herself motivated to make use of her spare time through the example she sees in her friend;

“For example, she would tell me “I got up in the morning and I was thinking that you are probably doing something or cleaning so I began to clean as well. I did not even think about getting into deep thoughts about my illness, instead I began doing things in my apartment.””

In essence, this friendship for Gabriella has become a source of empowerment as well as a source of kindness and support. More or less devoid of close family connections, Gabriella has found this friendship not only physically invigorating, but emotionally healing as well. As she explains, when it comes to overcoming the obstacles associated with mental illness, physical touch and sincere concern can sometimes be more important than medication;

“They filled me with lots of strong medications when in fact one hug would have been better than all the medications put together. Love and hard work towards self-improvement are better than doctors.”

Assessment of Mental Health Services

Notwithstanding the negative experiences of her hospital visits, Gabriella has been quite successful in terms of gaining appropriate treatment for her mental illness through the services available. A key component to this success though is the fact that she has obtained care through Polish-speaking service providers. Gabriella's family counsellor particularly stresses this point as a critical element alongside Gabriella's own strength and determination:

“Gabriella is an example of a person who doesn't give up. I think she could be an example to people who encounter emotional or psychological problems. She is exemplary in her struggle...The fact that there are Polish-speaking psychiatrists in Toronto cannot be stressed enough. She wouldn't have gone to an English-speaking psychiatrist.”