

UNVEILED

LIFE WITH MENTAL ILLNESS #9

Returning to regular life after spending about three weeks in the psych ward was like landing on a different planet. In the “free” world, I was expected to be in the take-care mode, managing my life on my own, tending to the needs of my family and myself. While the technical adjustment happened more smoothly, there was the emotional element as well. Every time I came back to myself after a manic episode, I was overwhelmed with shame. I didn’t want people see me, the woman who was recently discharged from the psych ward. The stigma of mental illness weighed heavy on my shoulders, accompanying me wherever I went, all the time.

As my life gradually returned to normal, I was eager to return to the OA (Overeaters’ Anonymous) group I had joined a few months before I was admitted to the hospital. While emotional eating hadn’t been much of a challenge for me in my adolescence and young adulthood, since my first manic episode this became part of my struggle, which led to copious weight gain. While OA proved to be a valuable resource for me in navigating the ups and downs of emotional eating from the start, upon my discharge from the ward, my need to be part of a group where emotions are discussed openly had intensified. While I had attended the sessions previously, I never felt as committed as I did now. At these meetings, I got to connect to women who were working through the steps of the program, sharing their triumphs and their struggles with one another. More importantly, the group setting, especially in phone meetings, offered me an opportunity, perhaps for the first time in my life, to be open about my struggles while staying very anonymous. While the meetings were focused on unhealthy eating habits due to emotional struggles, many of the members faced struggles similar to mine, dealing with one mental illness or another. Because they knew where I was coming from, when I would share something challenging that I was going through or had gone through, instead of saying, “That must be so hard,” fellow members would say, “I know it’s so hard.” Being in


it with other people meant everything to me; it made me feel comfortable to open up about the profound challenges I was dealing with, especially when I was finding it so difficult to establish my sense of self.

It was at these meetings that my appreciation for group support, which eventually led to the launch of Chazkeinu, was planted. The more comfortable I felt in this setting, the more I realized how healing it was for me, and the more I felt compelled to provide this kind of service to the community: a support group for women with mental illness.

For over a year following my first hospitalization, my life was more or less under control. With every passing day that I took my medication and attended therapy, I felt further removed from my manic state, more like the real Zahava that was present and grounded. I enjoyed being there for my husband and children, being a productive member of society, even taking care of myself.

However, in 2013, as the months progressed past the one-year mark since my discharge, I slowly went back down the slippery slope toward becoming unstable. Before I knew it, I wasn’t sleeping for several nights in a row, trying to call people and enlighten them about my spiritual clarity regarding Moshiach and our purpose in this world. My tendency to call Rabbis returned full force, and this time, I even managed to call two distinguished Rabbis who taught me in high school whom I had never dared to ask any questions of. Before long, I wasn’t able to take care of myself, much less my family. And then, one and a half years after I was first admitted to the psych ward, I was back.

In Hindsight

Before my first stay in the psych ward, I had never turned to writing as a means of healing. Since then, it has become a major coping mechanism. I’ve written a lot of songs on topics related to my illness. A theme that often comes up is: Who is the real me? I’m Zahava, not Zahava the Bipolar. My most recent song is about being able to move on while struggling at the same time. In all of them, my desire to grow from this illness and make the most of what Hashem sends my way comes through. 

To be continued...

Zahava List is the founder and director of Chazkeinu, a peer-led support organization for Jewish women who struggle with mental illness and their female family members.