



Life on the Continuum of Mental Health

By Lea Werthman

I became a passionate advocate for mental health in 2008, when my best friend took her own life. I channeled all of my hurt and grief into a personal crusade to attack the stigma that had kept her silent. I became a champion for people with mental illness.

At the time, I didn't identify what was happening to me as my own mental health challenge. This is how I-and the rest of the world-understood mental illness: as a binary thing. You either have it, or you don't. I didn't have it. My friend did, and it cost her her life.

My passion for mental health advocacy happily collided with the recent introduction of the Federal Public Service Workplace Mental Health Strategy. This strategy is helping to reframe all kinds of conversations about mental health, organizational culture, performance management and human resources. I have been honoured to take on the role of Mental Health Champion for the Citizen Service Branch.

The Mental Health Continuum: a transformational concept

In the old way of thinking, mental health was seen as a binary thing-we were either "healthy" or "ill." In the Mental Health Continuum, I found my "aha!" moment as a change agent-and in my own mental health. Clearly, we all live in a state of flux, somewhere along a continuum between the two extremes of "healthy" and "ill."

Most of us-we hope-live on the healthy side. But life is tough. Sometimes it's brutal. With this new understanding, it's clear we have to support people so they can go through their "reacting" and "injured" stages and come back to "healthy"-just as we have a responsibility to support someone who is physically ill or injured.

My story

Last Thanksgiving, my husband asked for a separation after 13 years of what I thought was the perfect marriage. My world tilted, and I fell into a big pool of crippling sadness. Immediately, I talked to my director. I contacted the Employee Assistance Program. I saw a therapist. I cried, I raged at the traffic, I wasn't sleeping well and I began to worry that, fight as I might, I was becoming "ill."

But the Continuum allowed me to see myself differently. Instead of seeing myself as "broken" or "ill," I now know that I am reacting to a jarring change. I may even be dipping into "injured" now and then-and that's ok. Sometimes I get a cough. Sometimes my arthritic knee hurts. It's just another moment on a continuum of wellness.

I am immensely grateful that I have an amazing director who gives me the space I need to do what I need to do first: take care of myself. ESDC's Workplace Mental Health Framework empowers me to ask for that help. Instead of going off on months of disability leave, I am working, supported by my office family, and getting through this.

I will not be defined by the sadness I am feeling. Instead, I will use this experience to share my story with you about our life on the continuum.

Share your thoughts and be part of the initiative.
Visit the iService Mental Health site: <http://iservice.prv/mentalhealth>

