Angela H’s Story

My childhood was filled with happy memories, but the sad memories stand out the most. Growing up, I always felt sad and anxious, but I never understood why. I was never able to live in the moment like other kids. I often woke up multiple times a night feeling anxious, and would immediately start calculating how much time I had left to sleep until I finally had to get up, not feeling rested at all. Over time, the anxiety and sadness became overwhelming. There were periods of time where I would shutdown, unable to function for weeks at a time. I refused to leave the house or talk to anybody. Each time, I would eventually just snap out of it, until these episodes got progressively worse and more severe.

My episodes caused me to miss a lot of school, and as an honors student in high school this became detrimental to my academic performance. I struggled to catch up on missed schoolwork and invented illnesses to cover my absences. In twelfth grade, I felt like I couldn’t go on anymore and I couldn’t control the anxiety or unrelenting feelings of sadness that consumed me. I felt like a failure and stopped going to school. My teachers and counselors checked on me and encouraged me to return, but I remained silent and my condition continued to worsen. I was scared, ashamed and extremely confused. Lying to my family became a regular habit as an attempt to cover up the fact that I was falling apart. I felt weak, like I was always letting people down, including myself. I would ask myself, “When did I become this weak person who couldn’t handle things?”

Eventually, the fog cleared long enough for me to get my GED, go to college, and live in clarity for several years before one episode progressed and I couldn’t snap out. I lost several great jobs and began paying bills with savings. It wasn’t long before my savings were gone and I was in danger of losing my car and my apartment. My sister came to visit me and quickly realized that I had not taking care of myself for quite some time. My apartment was a disaster and I desperately needed help. She drove me to the hospital, where I was assessed and admitted that day.

Being in the hospital for a week was a positive experience in my life. I learned that I had been living with two illnesses after being diagnosed with major depressive disorder and generalized anxiety disorder. I wasn’t weak, I was ill, and my illnesses could be treated with medications and therapy. Hospitalization gave me structure and routine. In a short time, my life became manageable. The idea of leaving was terrifying, and I hoped that my doctors would recommend a long-term stay instead of release.

The day before I was released, I saw a NAMI In Our Own Voice Presentation. I watched two intelligent, articulate, self-confident and funny individuals share their stories about living with mental illness. Hope flooded through what were black holes in my heart and brain. If failure wasn’t the end of their stories, why did it have to be the end of mine? NAMI meant help, hope and recovery. Knowing that NAMI was out there made my release exciting. I started attending the NAMI Connections support group and met wonderful caring peers who gave me support, friendship, and unconditional acceptance. For the first time in my life, I didn’t feel weird or different, and I was able to share what was on the inside without worrying about making sure my outside was presentable.

I am overjoyed to share that I am in now in Recovery. I see my psychiatrist regularly, and see my therapist as needed. For me, recovery is day to day and my life is full. I work full-time and volunteer with NAMI as a mentor for the Peer-to-Peer program and facilitate a Connections support group. NAMI has taught me how to recognize my triggers and negative patterns, and also that volunteering keeps recovery on my mind. I am in a healthy and stable romantic relationship. My family can now offer the support I need since taking NAMI’s Family to Family Education Class. I surround myself with positive influences and I try to find answers in others. Life still has its ups and downs but now I am able to cope and understand that bad days are not the end of the world. There is a lot out there for me, and now I know that I am never alone - I have NAMI!