Exit Stage Left

May 8, 2012 By Aundaray Guess

As part of Mental Illness Awareness Week which is observed from May7-May 13, I want to share my battle with my own demons.

I was new to New York City just moved here from Minneapolis. It was morning rush and unlike the jam packed highways I was used to being stuck in with my car, I was now letting someone else drive as I was partaking the subway. Since riding on the subway to work was new to me there was some excitement as I boarded the semi-crowded train. Yet my ease started to transform into discomfort as at each stop it seemed more and more people were getting on as the subway car seemed to be getting smaller. It got to the point you couldn't lift your arm if you tried as there was so many people around me.

The calm I had before was replaced by a heart that started to increase its rhythm. On cue I felt the first bead of sweat fall, followed by other beads and with my hand trapped to my side I was unable to wipe them away. I felt as if I was under a spotlight as it seemed everyone was staring at me, probably wondering who this sweating fool was. My perception of the people staring at me added with a crowded train and being underneath New York City was to mush as the bead of sweat was now a rainstorm. The doors opened as it came to a stop and even though it was not my stop I shoved my way off, just to get out. I just had to get out.

I realized I just had an anxiety attack. I recognized it as I struggled with it growing up. I never quite knew where it came from. But it seemed to always come for a visit when I was surrounded by strangers. I could be standing in a long line at a supermarket and my heart would do its thing and like a well timed duet, the sweat followed.

It got to the point where I would avoid going to places if I suspected I would be in the company of strangers. Avoidance was my best defense and although I would miss out on things such as parties or get togethers or any fun activity, in my mind I convinced myself I was in a safe place. It made me feel like I was in control and I wasn't in a fight or flight mode.

I tried to just deal with it and come up with tricks such as going to places when I knew it wouldn't be busy and always having a sweat rag in my back pocket for those moments the dam broke. Even holding my breathing and slowly counting to ten so I could control my heart rate seemed to work.

It was all about control and I was slowly losing it. I don't know what incident triggered me to see a therapist but I ended up on the couch telling my story. After several sessions I finally had a name for it. PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder).

At first I thought the therapist was mistaken as I have never been to war, but in actuality I had

been in war; a war with my mind. Going back in time and observing what traumatic event caused this; I was able to name it.

Unknown to me it all went back to when I was sexually abused as a child. The seeds were planted then and from that seed sprouted leaves of self-doubt, unworthiness, low sense of self and a feeling that I was never good enough. No matter how successful I was it explained why I wanted everyone to like me and how I would audition for people's acceptance. Even if it was a stranger I passed for a second, I was passive in my walk of life and looked for acknowledgement.

PTSD is a real factor and in a way I feel it's how I became infected with HIV as I was searching for that acceptance and doing anything or giving you anything just for you to say you like me, even if it was a falsehood. Even knowing I was putting myself at risk, my sense of rational was getting in the way of my act. I knew better but felt I couldn't do better. In a way I felt I had control as I shuffled across my stage.

Yet when there were too many to please my self went into shutdown mode and instead of admiration it seemed like I was receiving judgment.

It takes a step to climb a mountain and no matter how much you try you can't just walk around the mountain or pretend it's not there. For me to get to the other side I had to take that first step and with my involvement in seeking mental health services I can now say that my demons have been exorcised.

So in this observance of Mental Illness Awareness Week I erase my stigma by giving it a voice and name and a refusal to address it in the dark. Instead of feeling like I'm in the spotlight, I place the spotlight on it as I remove the stigma and regain my life.

Now when I ride the subway, even if it's stuffed, my fear is gone and with it the anxiety of being in unfamiliar places. For me the show is over as I no longer audition for acceptance but have no problem embracing the soul that says to me, "You did it!"

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