

If I had my life to live over

Years ago, when deep depressions and other mental health challenges were a way of life for me, my only options seemed to be medical treatment and hospitalization. I was actually relieved when I was told that there was a pill, Lithium, which along with an anti-depressant, might give me lots of relief. Here was something I could easily do, and it would fix everything.

I had a lot of difficult issues in my life at that time that were not addressed an abusive and unsupportive spouse, five adolescent children and various foster children that I was responsible

for, and running a school for children with learning and emotional difficulties.

I never took time off, I didn't have any rest or relaxation, I never bought anything nice for myself, I never even went out to eat or to a movie, I didn't have time for friends, my self-esteem was in the cellar and I had unresolved trauma issues from my childhood.

I bought the medication and I started taking it. I took it for a very long time, until I had a toxic reaction to it when I had a stomach "bug." I got very, very sick. And that was the end of that. My body didn't want lithium anymore.

But still I didn't get it. With my doctor's help, I began a long search for other drugs that would replace the lithium. And over time, both my physical and mental health deteriorated, along with the quality of my life. I remember the exact moment when I said to myself, "there has got to be a different way, and I am going to find it."

Even though I had serious brain fog by that time, working with my vocational rehabilitation counselor, I began to study how people who experience all kinds of so-called "psychiatric symptoms" cope with these intense feelings and behaviors on a daily basis, how they live their lives, how they recover and move on. I learned the most amazing things. What I learned changed my life completely, and subsequently, as I shared my findings in books, videos and trainings, changed many, many other lives.

If I had my life to live over, and if I had known then what I know now, when I first began noticing feelings of sadness, anxiety, irrational fear and worry that were getting in the way of my life, instead of going to the doctor, I would have sat down with a pencil and paper and developed a WRAP for myself. But WRAP had not even been developed at that time. But if it had.....

First I would have made a list of Wellness Tools. I think that would have been enough to get me lifted up enough to do the rest of the Plan and to get me feeling better. On my list of Wellness Tools at that time I would have included many things "not to do." They would have included:

- Do not commit to doing more things in 24 hours than I can possibly do.

- Do not take on any new responsibilities.

- Do not neglect my own needs for food, rest and sleep.

- Do not spend time with people who treat me badly (there were a few back then but not anymore).

- Do not eat sugar (it makes me feel horrible).

- At least once a month, buy myself something to wear that feels just right.

Just those few things would have made a huge difference for me. I would never have needed any lithium. More positive things would have been:

Buy myself something pretty (in those days I only bought things for my children).
Take a walk in the woods every day.
Take an adult education class.
Take a day off and pamper myself all day.
Spend time with good friends, people who are affirming and supportive.
Lay in the hammock and look up at the trees.

I could go on and on with lists of Wellness Tools I could have used back then. Then I would have used those tools to develop the rest of the plan. My Daily Maintenance Plan would have given me strict instructions on what to eat, when to eat it, when to go to bed and when to take some time for myself.

My abusive spouse would have been at the top of my list of triggers, and with my WRAP I think I would have gotten myself out of that situation much sooner. My Triggers Action Plan would have said "Avoid people who treat you badly," and that would have been the end of that.

My Early Warning Signs would have included feeling overwhelmed, tired and worn out. Some days of rest and relaxation and asking others to take over some of my responsibilities would have easily addressed that.

When things were breaking down, like I was crying all the time, I would have had a long talk with a friend. Perhaps we would have planned a retreat together. Or I would have spent a whole afternoon working in my garden, hiking in the hills or working on a quilt.

I would have developed an intensive crisis plan for myself. Probably I would never have needed it. But if I did, it would have been there to tell others how to provide me with care until I could again care for myself.

Here I am now, all these years later. I now have a WRAP On-line that I use as my daily guide to living. I update it regularly, whenever I feel the need.

Every day I need and use my WRAP. Today I have had some bad news about a colleague who is having some health challenges. My work is overwhelming. I have too much to do. Instead of reaching for the pill bottle (I don't have a stash anymore) I am thinking of fixing myself a healthy snack and eating it on the back porch where I can listen to the birds. Then I will work in my garden for a bit and call a friend for a supportive chat. I will cook myself a healthy dinner and eat with my spouse. I will stay home this evening and take a short walk, finish reading that good book that I picked up last week at the library, and get a good night's sleep.

I am strongly reminded of the importance of “Living WRAP” every single day. There is a lot of unexpected and serious illness in my family. Every day my family’s welfare is my primary concern. As I age, I have some health issues that need attention as well. And maintaining my mental health needs my attention every single day. Now I can really say that I am “Living WRAP,” not day to day, but moment to moment.

Every single moment I have to think about my Daily Maintenance Plan. I ask myself, “What do I have to do today for myself to be sure I can be available to others if needed?” Then I have to be absolutely sure I do those things.

Often I get a call with a new piece of information or find myself waiting and waiting for reassurance that all is well. I now have first-hand experience with how to get by, using my Triggers Action Plan, as I wait and wait and wait. It is not easy but I have managed. I keep reminding myself that if I “fall apart,” it is not going to help anybody and it will make it more difficult for everybody. So I pick up my knitting, find a diversionary TV program or watch a video, clean something that really needs it, talk to my spouse, read something or use one of the other tools in my Triggers Action Plan to get me through the long hard hours and even days.

Being ever watchful, there are times when I notice Early Warning Signs creeping in. Then I refer to that action plan, and intensify my efforts at maintaining my wellness, to get myself back on track as quickly as possible.

And there are times when, if I wasn’t paying close attention, I could easily find myself in the “When things are breaking down” section of my WRAP. Early this morning I talked with a friend about a child sexual abuse case we are both working on. When I got off the phone, I would have easily fit into this category, so deep was my despair and my concern for this small child. I needed quick evasive action. So I had a talk with my spouse, went to a yoga class at the senior center, had tea and a loving chat with a dear friend, took a long walk in the woods, and had a healthy dinner. This was so different from the old days, when deep despair would have meant popping extra pills, canceling activities and maybe a trip to the emergency room or the hospital.

I also want to mention the importance to me of having a strong Wellness Toolbox that is constantly revised as I uncover new Wellness Tools. Whenever I get into a real “pinch’, where things are really hard and my action plans don’t seem to be doing it, I get out my Wellness Toolbox, which now contains over 100 possible options, and so far, I have always found something I could do that would help.

Sometimes I find it helpful in “Living WRAP” to review some of what I have written, and what others have written about WRAP, in my books, and on the websites (www.mentalhealthrecovery.com, www.wraparoundtheworld.com). I Particularly recommend The WRAP Story, a collection of WRAP stories from WRAP users all over the world.