

My Degree is in Depression



The following is my personal story...

Unfortunately, I was unable to attend college, but over the years I have earned my degree in DEPRESSION. I suppose that makes me Alice Davidson Clark, M.D.D.

The M.D.D. stands for Major Depressive Disorder. I am never quite sure what will trigger "it." "It" is my depression. Not the ordinary whirlwind kind of depression; I mean the act-of-God-tornado kind of depression.

In my former life, I was successful and productive. I cannot tell you when or how I changed, but over the course of about six years I lost everything one at a time. Gone were my sanity, my job, my home, my car, my money, my children, my friends and, most of all, my dignity. Someone once wrote you have to lose everything to see who you are with nothing. Guess what? After losing everything, I found a person I never knew existed.

Although this is a path I would not have chosen, I am thankful I found my way. The same disease that almost took my life has become my purpose in life.

My disease is a brain disorder and a disease of the central nervous system, which the majority of society doesn't understand. I am living proof that with medication therapy and psychotherapy, a person can live a productive and meaningful life while living with a mental illness.

Once I was able to give this real disease a name, it was much easier to get back to living. Thoughts of disappearing from the face of the earth had taken over my life. I did not want to die; I just wanted the pain to stop. The first step of my recovery was medication therapy. Adherence to a strict schedule for taking medication turned out to be very helpful. Gradually, over six to eight weeks, I was capable of thinking again. For me, this was a helpful first step.

One of the most devastating things about depression is losing the ability to concentrate. Without concentration, I was unable to make wise decisions about anything in my life. It felt as if the bridge connecting my thoughts was washed out. Medication seemed to bridge the gap for me. Suddenly, I could complete a thought. Finally, I realized I wanted to get better. I was recommended for cognitive behavioral therapy. Now it was time for me to learn how to think all over again.

Imagine walking along normally, and one day a truck hit you. As a result, you were paralyzed. What would it take for you to learn to walk again? Medication for the pain, therapy to learn how to walk again and communicating with other people who had experienced the same trauma. The same things were necessary for me to learn how to live with a mental illness.

Going to therapy gave me something to look forward to in my life. My therapist and I started each session with an agenda and decided which issues took priority. Once an agenda was established, we tried to stick with it.



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Goals were set, and goals were met. I kept a record of everything I did with the help of a chart divided into seven days and 24 hours. That's easy to do when you're in bed all day. She asked me to complete five easy tasks each day. Easy meant walking into the kitchen, brushing my hair, brushing my teeth, taking my medication and preparing my homework.

Cognitive therapy taught me a new way to think, sort of like learning to walk again. When you change the way you think, you can change the way you live.

My life is better today than I ever believed it could be. It is not perfect, but excellence does not require perfection. Therapy worked for me. Most of all, I learned what to do when a tornado heads my way. I am aware of the symptoms and how to get through another storm. I am now in recovery.

My family is proud of the progress I have made, and I am proud of myself too. Now I wish I had all those years back that I had lost, but I will not feel guilty. Through cognitive therapy I've tried to free myself of the guilt I felt and replace it with regret for the way things have happened.

My hope is that by sharing this experience, someone will find a connection to their own story and realize that help is available. Cognitive therapy is one answer. I am not saying recovery is easy, but it is possible. Through medication, psychotherapy, education and advocacy, I found my purpose in life. Five years ago, I couldn't think of a reason to keep living. Today I need a hundred years to complete everything I want to do.

Alice Davidson Clark