

UNVEILED

LIFE WITH MENTAL ILLNESS #10

As a member of Overeaters Anonymous (OA), I didn't only learn about the power of group support. It was during those sessions that I realized something that would ultimately lead to the birth of Chazkeinu, an organization that provides support to fellow Jewish women who have mental illness: by giving *chizuk* to others, I was helping myself.

After I was discharged from the psychiatric ward in the hospital, it was clear to me that many people in my community were aware of what had transpired. Especially since I still had a touch of mania even then, I was the one who informed some people of where I'd been. At a community event shortly after my hospitalization, an acquaintance came up to me. She started the conversation with the regular, "Hi, how are you?" But my response was anything but regular. "Oh," I said, "Actually, I'm just out of the hospital. I have bipolar disorder."

This was certainly not what she had expected to hear from me, but it was clearly meant to be. As it turned out, this awkward conversation ended up leading toward a deep friendship between us. It wasn't long before this woman confided that her own daughter was going through a similar journey, dealing with a mental illness of her own. When we originally met, this woman wasn't at the point where she felt open enough to talk about it, but as our friendship developed, we were able to be there for each other in a way that gave us both so much *chizuk*. That encounter was perhaps the first time that my high feeling led me to open myself up to someone else in a way that showed me how much sharing the details of my challenge with another individual made a difference to them and me.

Because people knew what had happened to me, I ended up being the right address for many others whose mental illness was under wraps and were desperate for peer support. Every now and then, people would say to me, "I have a family member who's going through something. Would you be open enough to talk about it?" Because I had shared my experiences at OA, I had learned how to express myself in terms of my own personal experience, so I was actually happy to be there for someone in this way. More than once, the "family member" I was asked to speak with ended up being someone I knew well and I would have had no idea what she was going through.


In the case of the woman I met at the event, at the time I

met her she was struggling between wanting to be a support for her daughter and getting over the shock that someone she loved so much was going through something she could not relate to. The shame she experienced was overwhelming, paralyzing. From after the event, we made up to meet often. She would tell me what was going on in her life and I would tell her what it was like for me. She would come to me with her questions: "My daughter is doing this and that. Is it okay?" And I would reassure her, "Yes, this is part of the illness." It gave her tremendous hope to see me getting myself together, moving into a stable time, when her daughter was still in the darker parts of the struggle. Speaking with this new friend also helped me see what my family members were going through as the caretakers when I wasn't available. We connected deeply, with both of us gaining from the relationship in our own way. Giving to this woman brought purpose and meaning to my illness.

After having been mentally and emotionally stable for three years, my husband and I were looking forward to welcoming our third child into the family, with the approval of our *rav* and my doctor. Although it had been five years since the previous birth, after which I did experience a relapse, and I had been stable for a considerable period of time, I didn't know what the future would bring. Would this birth also be followed by a relapse or would I finally be a happy, healthy mother for my new baby and the rest of my family?

In Hindsight

The more I gave support to others when I was in a time of need, the more I realized how much *chizuk* I was deriving from it. Today, as the director of Chazkeinu, I bring this up often to the women in our support group. One of my best coping mechanisms when I'm in a hard place is to stop and think, "Who can use a phone call right now?" When I give to others, I fill myself up in the best way possible. Instead of thinking, "Who will I reach out to that can make me feel better?" I think, "Whom can I help feel better?"

Even when I was in the hospital, confined to the psychiatric ward, being there for the people around me was still possible. Every one of us, from our own place, no matter what we're struggling with, has the ability to do that. Giving from ourselves is always possible and always healing. 

To be continued...

Zahava List is the founder and director of Chazkeinu, a peer-led support organization for Jewish women who struggle with mental illness and their female family members.