

Tina's Story – I Forgot My Body

When I got clean, I was so thoroughly embraced by my friends I felt a tight circle of support around me. It was like they were arm in arm, three people deep, holding me up and loving me until I could love myself. I had good medical insurance, a therapist I trusted, and a faith community. I needed all of it because it was a day-to-day, moment-to-moment struggle to stand up. The depression that made me so vulnerable to alcohol to begin with was right there, ready to take up residence once I quit.

This went on for a few years, with very little let up except during one period when a close friend's diagnosis motivated me to train for a cancer walk. It was the only time in my life I was motivated to start the day. You would think I would have gotten the hint, right? No! When I completed my obligation, I went right back to dark shades in the morning and the daily accomplishments of getting myself downstairs for coffee by 10:00. My depression was bigger than I was, and my mind drew no connection between exercise and relief.

Just over a year ago, a friend brought me to a Suppers meeting. She was going because her way of eating had brought on weight gain and diabetes and she was determined to turn herself around. Remembering that circle of arms that held me up when I had to make big changes, I went. I thought I was doing her a favor. I guess I was, but she also tricked me. She knew I'd hear something that applied to me.

After we made lunch that was basically hamburgers made out of salmon and a huge salad, the leader started a discussion on how our bodies have been left out of our recovery equations. I didn't even know what she was talking about, but everybody else did. At the table there were people in all different kinds of recovery, people who had eaten and drunk their ways into diabetes, alcoholism, chronic depression and panic disorder. I fit right in on two scores.

Every person shared a personal experience about not being able to turn around their problems until they woke up to the fact that they had physical bodies with physical world needs for exercise and good nutrition. I split in half. Half of me wanted to stay and share my story about the cancer walk. The other half of me wanted to bolt. I love going to therapy. The discussion challenged my conviction that if I did lots of it, my depression would go away. But no matter who I went to or for how long I stayed, depression was always on my radar screen. Neither my therapists nor I realized that I was doing therapy on a depressed brain, and that my brain had to be dealt with too if we wanted the work to have any lasting effect.

I stayed with the discussion. I felt threatened but I stayed. By the time it came around to me, my denial was still in tact, but I managed to come up with a few convincing sentences about how the only time in my life the depression let up was when I was training to do the 60-mile walk.

Now, I had told the story of how great I felt training dozens of times, but that was the first time I heard what I was saying. Like everyone at that table, forgetting to take care of my body's basic physical needs had had dire consequences.

The next week I joined the walkers, who took a brisk walk after every meeting. Eventually I did the breakfast challenge and discovered, like most but not all of the group, that a hot meal like dinner in the morning set me up for better moods all day long. In the end, I needed to talk to a nutritionist too because my digestion had never fully repaired after the years of drinking.

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Today I actually experience whole days at a time when the memory of chronic depression doesn't even cross my mind. I walk like crazy and eat like a king in the morning and a pauper at night. My work in therapy has only benefitted too since my brain is part of my body and it isn't starving any more.