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MEDIA PLANET

How One Man Works Past His OCD to Deconstruct the Stigma

Sean was in his early 30s, didn't work and lived with his father. He says he was wearing a mask, trying to hide his mental pain.

By Kristen Castillo

"I would be immobile," he says. "I wouldn't leave my room, wouldn't leave my chair. But somehow I'd show my face to my friends on the weekends and get some relief by going to bars."

He'd return home with "the worst hangover" which lasted for days. Then he'd repeat the cycle — staying motionless all week, followed by binge drinking on the weekend.

A need for control

Sean started drinking and partying during his senior year of high school in Ohio. He was trying to quell his anxiety and says alcohol made him feel "like a normal person."

His panic attacks started when he was 13. He worried a lot, especially about his mother who was sick with cancer. She died when he was 15.

Sean had Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) too. It impacted his everyday life, like getting dressed.

It took Sean four hours to put on his pants. If they didn't feel right, he'd take them off and re-do the process. He has permanent scars on his legs from injuries sustained from the repetitive behavior.

Even turning off the lights was overwhelming. In college, he'd flip the light switch on and off for nearly an hour until it was perfect.

He said these mental rituals were about counteracting one thought with another. He worried if things weren't right, something would go wrong or someone in his family would be hurt.

Throughout his teens and 20s, Sean knew he was in trouble but he was too afraid to make a change.

"I didn't know help was out there," he says. "I was scared to take risks, scared of the stigma and scared to ask for help."

In his early 30s, Sean finally asked his father for help.

"I feel like maybe I have the opportunity make a difference in a person's life or several," says Sean, who quit drinking. 'I wanted to give meaning to my struggles.'"

Reaching out

“The person who finally told me to get help was me,” says Sean, who was treated twice at **McLean Hospital** in Boston. He was diagnosed with generalized anxiety, clinical depression and very severe OCD.

He was both relieved to have a diagnosis and eager to get well.

These days Sean, 37, doesn’t have symptoms of his OCD, which is well managed.

Knowing his mental health struggles are “all based on fear, uncertainty and losing control,” he’s learned to live with uncertainty and be more flexible in his mindset.

Now living permanently in Boston, he works as an artist and is focused on his future. He wants to be a motivational speaker and a peer support specialist, helping others take control of their mental health.

He’s sharing his story as part of the McLean Hospital’s “**Deconstructing Stigma**” campaign, which aims to reduce the shame often associated with people who have mental health issues.

Statistics show 75 percent of people with a mental illness say they’ve experienced stigma.

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