

A journey toward wellness



When Beth walked out of Akron City Hospital five years ago the only thing she owned was the shirt on her back and a suggestion from a hospital psychiatrist, that she now says, "saved her life." The suggestion? Go to P.E.S.

That's not PEZ, as in the candy dispenser, but rather the acronym for Psychiatric Emergency Services, a program run by Portage Path Behavioral Health that specializes in helping people overcome psychiatric crisis. Components of the P.E.S. program include emergency evaluation, where an individual is checked out by a team of psychiatrists, nurses, and counselors, and the Crisis Stabilization Unit, a 16-bed ward that offers short-term treatment and monitoring.

If you had to create the perfect version of a wholesome, middle-American woman-next-door, you'd make someone who looks a lot like Beth W. Conservatively well-dressed, welcoming smile, polite to a fault - she could very easily be the local PTA president or your long-lost friend from high school. You'd never suspect she was once suicidal.

The journey that led Beth to P.E.S. didn't happen overnight. It took 36 long years. Years filled with more pain, sadness, and frustration than most of us will ever know. Beth's first bout with depression began in her early adolescence when her father abandoned her family, leaving Beth and her mother to fend for themselves.

"He left when I was twelve and I never saw him again. He didn't even pay child support," she remembers.

Reeling from the effects of the divorce and her mother's subsequent remarriage, Beth began attending counseling sessions at a local center. These sessions gave her a chance to express her feelings, particularly the unresolved issues she felt about her father's abandonment.

"It was through these sessions that I realized that alcoholism, depression, and phobias ran in my family," she recalls.

Beth's childhood therapist listened and supported her through her turbulent teenage years, a time that she refers to as "acquired and difficult." This support would not last long, as the counselor abruptly moved away. Again, Beth was left feeling abandoned by a significant male figure in her life.

"When he left I felt as if I had no one to talk to. My family was the type that never communicated with one another about their problems. Their theory was, if we don't talk about it, there is nothing wrong."

The Effects of Abandonment

In Beth's case, the abandonment she felt led to a lack of self-esteem, the core element needed to build successful relationships and cope with life's challenges.

John R. Rifkin, Ph.D., the author of *The Importance of Father/Daughter Relationships*, comments, "Certainly by the age 12, the majority of young women are beginning to deal with the change in their bodies, and so is the world around them. It is during this time frame - from approximately fourth grade through ninth - that a positive relationship with their father is especially needed. A father's caring lends young women the sense that they have value beyond their appearance, intrinsic value for who they are. That kind of support in such a difficult emotional time is priceless."

Beth never had this luxury, and it would affect the way she related to men for years to come.

She graduated from Tallmadge High School, but never felt completely free from her struggle with depression. Soon thereafter Beth reunited with an old boyfriend. Although she was happy and excited to have someone in her life, she was unaware that what he would bring to the relationship would only add to the pain she had experienced throughout her childhood.

"He encouraged me to quit my job and cut my ties with my family, and all the while (he was) mentally and physically abusing me," says Beth in disbelief that she let someone control her the way he did. "I knew that my relationship with him was destructive, but I thought that was just what I deserved."

As the relationship continued, Beth felt herself sinking further and further into depression. "I was completely hopeless. I was in such a deep depression ... I slept a lot, and towards the end I could hardly function. I had caused my family pain, I had serious financial problems, and my boyfriend was continuously abusing me - I just felt as if I had no one and nothing to live for."

The one other thing Beth remembers during that time was thinking that she would have to explain to everyone why she had attempted to take her own life, but to her surprise not one person raised the question. Later that evening, after her boyfriend had gone to bed, Beth began taking pain killers and washing them down with alcohol. The next day she awoke in a City Hospital bed, only to think that failing to commit suicide was just another thing that she couldn't do right. That is when a desperate Beth W. decided to take her own life.

"I remember one morning I woke up and realized I was going to kill myself. It's the strangest feeling ... knowing that you're going to die later that day. I cleaned the house, I made sure my cousin wasn't working his paramedic shift, and I talked with some friends."

While in the hospital, her cry for help seemed to be smothered out by her family's "if we don't talk about it, it doesn't exist" philosophy. "Not one person asked me why I attempted suicide. If I were in their shoes that would have been my first question."

Nowhere to Go

According to The National Institute of Mental Health, the majority of suicide attempts are expressions of extreme distress that need to be addressed, and not careless bids for attention. In fact, immediately after her recovery Beth destroyed the suicide letters she had written to her mother and boyfriend, in an attempt to avoid attention.

In May of 1995, while standing outside of City Hospital exactly one week after her suicide attempt, Beth was faced with what seemed to be a no-win situation: return to her abusive and destructive relationship with her boyfriend or go back to a dysfunctional family.

"I had nowhere to go. My family situation was just as troubling as my relationship with my boyfriend. If I would have returned to my boyfriend's house, I would have definitely tried to kill myself again. It would have only been a matter of days or weeks."

Beth was literally on the sidewalk when she told the psychiatrist that she still didn't feel well and had nowhere to go. Realizing the gravity of the situation, the doctor immediately walked back inside the hospital, made a few calls and referred Beth to Portage Path Psychiatric Emergency Services (P.E.S.), a place where she would receive the treatment she needed in a short-term residential environment.

The Road to Recovery

Beginning with her first interaction with the intake nurse at P.E.S., Beth remembers feeling safe. "When I was at Psychiatric Emergency Services the nurse who I first spoke with guided me through what would take place during my stay. I wish I could remember her name, because she was a wonderful person."

P.E.S. provided Beth with what she needed most - an emotional safe haven. After only one week at P.E.S., Beth was able to reflect on the issues in her life that had led her to such deep despair. Shortly thereafter, she began treatment in Portage Path's Intensive Treatment Services (I.T.S.), an outpatient partial hospitalization program for individuals who need care that is more intensive than individual counseling, but less so than inpatient. Beth was able to attend morning group I.T.S. sessions, which used a combination of counseling techniques and activities to improve functioning and socialization skills in participants.

At first Beth remembers being reluctant to enter group therapy, but as time went on she realized that it was a place for her to go where people would listen to her.

"The people in I.T.S. treated me with respect and dignity. The I.T.S. Team Coordinator helped me a lot. He is a very caring and gentle man, he made me feel very comfortable." The time she spent in I.T.S. gave Beth an opportunity to openly discuss the issues from her childhood, which then led to a life long depression and her near-fatal suicide attempt.

With her mother's assistance Beth was able to move into her own apartment, attend counseling sessions, and return to working a full-time job; however, she was also plagued with guilt from the financial and emotional strain she felt she had placed on her mother. "It was awful to be indebted to someone you love, but it felt really, really good to get back on my feet and take care of myself. That was very important to me."

Now single and enjoying it, Beth W. has received counseling from Portage Path Behavioral Health licensed professional clinical counselor Jill Lowery for the past five years. Jill continues to work with Beth on self-esteem, depression, and relationships issues. "My ex-boyfriend tried to contact me, but I think he realized after seven or eight months that I was not coming back," says Beth proudly.

Today Beth is busy working on her new life. "I believe that the reason I am a success is because of the care I received at Portage Path, but Jill tells me that I was the one who did all of the hard work."

Beth may have been abandoned by her father, but she never abandoned herself. She saw the benefits of seeking professional behavioral health care at a young age, and continues to benefit from therapy today.

"I came to Portage Path without a home, health insurance, or money. They reached out their hand to help me when I thought no one ever would. Now, I am a fully functioning citizen who is proud to be receive behavioral health care from such a wonderful community organization."