

A True Survivor

She wasn't stranded on a remote island or left in the wild outback. She didn't have to endure tribal council. Nonetheless, this 35-year-old Green resident has more claim to the title of "Survivor" than Tina Wesson or Richard Hatch ever will.

With her toned physique and bubbly personality, Stacey appears to be fit for competition in any of Survivor's immunity challenges. You'd never guess she was a single mother of three who spent the last five months in a partial hospitalization program receiving intensive counseling for panic disorder.

Panic disorder is an anxiety disorder that affects 2.4 million Americans each year, and is characterized by sudden, repeated episodes of intense fear accompanied by physical symptoms that mimic heart attacks, such as heart palpitations, tingling sensations in the fingers and toes, and difficulty breathing. These episodes are commonly called panic attacks.

Other common symptoms of a panic disorder include sweating, fear of dying or losing control, chest pains, faintness, dizziness, trembling, hot and cold flashes, choking sensations, nausea, and feelings of unreality.

Unless you've had one, it's not easy to understand what a person goes through during a panic attack. The closest most people will ever come is waking up suddenly out of a frightening dream in the middle of the night - confused, scared, maybe sweating.

Some have described the experience as beginning with a vague feeling of apprehension which grows to intense fear,

accompanied by the sensation of somehow being detached from the experience. Others have said that their surroundings become hazy, and that they feel like they're a puppet or robot that's under the control of someone else.

"People can acquire panic disorder at various ages," says Donna McDonald, Ph.D., a psychologist at Portage Path Behavioral Health, "However, it most often begins in the late teens to early thirties. Some individuals seem to have their first panic symptoms when they are under a lot of stress."

"I thought I was going crazy. I remember spending a lot of time in the hospital emergency room because I thought I was having heart attacks"

Recalls Stacey, "I first started having panic attacks when I was 13 years old. There were a lot of things going on in my life then, including

my parents divorce. At the time, I thought I was going crazy. I remember spending a lot of time in the hospital emergency room because I thought I was having heart attacks, but the doctors could never find anything physically wrong with me."

As a teenager, Stacey never imagined she would spend the next 22 years of her life struggling with mysterious symptoms and frightening experiences. Like many families coping with mental illness, Stacey's family had difficulty accepting reality, and simply hoped it would go away.

"My family thought that I was going crazy because the doctors were unable to make

an accurate diagnosis at the time. I was afraid, because my grandfather was institutionalized with a mental illness and I didn't want to be placed in a mental hospital. Instead, my family just avoided the situation, and tried not to discuss it."

As the years went by, Stacey's panic attacks became daily experiences, and her world became smaller and smaller. Like many others with mental illness, Stacey tried to numb her tortured feelings with alcohol and nicotine, but found that these didn't lessen the pain.

"I feared having a panic attack so much that I became very introverted and depressed. I quit two jobs because I basically couldn't go out into public without having a panic attack. It got to the point where if I had a panic attack somewhere, I would avoid that place, such as the grocery store, a job site, and restaurants. At one point, I quit working, let my house go, and for nine weeks I forgot to send my 11 year-old daughter to school. I don't even remember taking care of my infant son, but I think my mothering instinct was so powerful that caring for him was automatic."

Approximately one year ago, Stacey hit bottom.

Her husband divorced her, and soon after giving birth to her third child she experienced postpartum depression, which made her already depressed state even more dark.

"My depression was so deep that it just seemed unreal, and my fear of having another attack became stronger and stronger. One day I just realized that if this kept on I was going to die," says Stacey, visualizing the moment in her head.

That same day, Stacey's father witnessed one of her panic attacks and immediately rushed her to St. Thomas Hospital.

"I was in the St. Thomas Hospital Emergency Room being examined when a

nurse referred me to Portage Path Psychiatric Emergency Services. I thought it was just another referral, I had no clue that it would change my life," remembers Stacey as she grins with relief.

It was at Portage Path Psychiatric Emergency Services where Stacey discovered that the condition which imprisoned her for 20 years went by the name of panic disorder.

"My father and step-mother agreed to support my three children and I while I took part in an Intensive Treatment Services (I.T.S.) program at Portage Path's Akron Clinic. I ended up staying in the program for five months. They helped get a handle on my disorder. They taught me breathing and relaxation techniques and showed me different ways of thinking about my attacks."

Stacey has now graduated from the I.T.S. program and has resumed a normal life. She can now drive on expressways, eat in restaurants, attend nursing school, and work a full-time job - things which were impossibilities eight months ago.

"I feel like I got my life back again. I still experience some anxiety, but I now know that there is a name for how I feel, and reasons why I feel the way I do. The best part about being back on my feet is knowing that I have a support system in my family, church, and at Portage Path Behavioral Health."

If you would like to learn more about panic disorder or depression, click on the American Psychological Association web site at www.apa.com, visit the Portage Path Behavioral Health web site at www.portagepath.org, or call Portage Path at 330-253-3100.