

Scars Tell Tale of Hope

Looking up to view Ben's face, I expect to see despair, sadness, perhaps even anger. To my surprise, I am met with a luminous smile emanating from a tall, dark, and handsome man who bears a bit of a resemblance to Kevin Costner.

Even though the story behind the scars is a difficult one, this 55 year-old Akron resident wishes to share his story in the chance it will offer hope to others dealing with feelings of suicide.

"If coming forward and recounting my struggles helps prevent someone else from experiencing even half the pain that I went through, then I am more than willing to do it," offers Ben.

Ben's tale begins in 1985, when, at the age of 37, he started to experience feelings of extreme, unrelenting anxiety.

"I would get this tingling feeling going up my left arm, but I didn't know what it was at first," says Ben, his voice trembling as if he was feeling the sensations all over again. "I went to my family physician and he referred me out to a psychologist who later diagnosed me with severe anxiety and put me on Paxil."

At the time Ben felt a bit uncomfortable about his treatment.

"I didn't feel that medication was necessary, because I didn't think that I was feeling that bad. So I stopped seeing my treatment team (psychologist & psychiatrist) and just continued to see my family physician if I had any other problems."

After seven years being off medication, Ben says he was no longer able to cope with his increasingly intense anxiety attacks. One of the events that worsened these attacks were his disorderly neigh-

The rough, raised, reddish lines stretch from just beyond his Adam's apple to the back of Ben's neck like a disturbing road map to a difficult life. The scars are uncomfortable to look at, almost screaming out with hurt and pain.

bors, who he suspected were drug dealers because they would be up all day & night cursing, yelling, and throwing things.

"One night I just got fed up with all of the noise. So I walked outside

and began writing down all of the license plate numbers on the cars, and I went back home and called the police," regrets Ben. "After that, every time I would walk out of my house they would scream and cuss at me."

From that point on Ben's anxiety reached to new heights, which caused his thoughts, feelings, and behaviors to become frantic. According to Bob Bingham, a licensed professional clinic counselor at Portage Path Behavioral Health in Akron says, the excessive worry, rumination, and dread associated with anxiety can lead to depression. Bingham adds, "I have never met anyone who was happy about their anxiety and it's related symptoms."

For Ben, the worsening anxiety led him down into depression.

"My depression came over me like a cloud," says Ben his face cringing as he remembers those feelings. "I just would sit on my couch for days feeling sad, angry, and dark. I was just immobilized."

Then something changed.

On Memorial Day weekend of 1999, Ben felt as if he couldn't take any more pain. As he recounts his suicide attempt in a deep and somber voice, I feel a strange intensity creep into the room and began to visualize his actions in my mind.

"I just became overwhelmed with my depression. I remember feeling very evil and dark, and for two whole days that weekend I never left the house. All I

did was sit around and smoke cigarettes.”

“Finally, I just couldn’t take it anymore, and I decided to go down stairs and do myself in. So I put my two cats in my small bedroom and made sure that they had plenty of food and water, because I wasn’t sure what would happen to me, or how long it was going to be until someone found me,” explains Ben.

The San Francisco Suicide Prevention Organization reports that handling seemingly minor details, such as providing for the care of loved ones or pets or making sure the house is clean, is strangely common among individuals preparing to take the drastic step of ending their lives. Ben found this to be true.

“I remember laying a cover on the floor of my laundry room so whatever mess I made would be soaked up by the cover instead of spreading all over the newly finished basement floor,” he says, still obviously amazed that he actually paid attention to these small details in such a stressful moment.

“At first I decided to drink bleach, but that only caused me to throw up. Then I grabbed a pair scissors and a carving knife and began cutting my arms, my neck, and my genital area,” Ben recounts, holding out his arms to show the wounds.

“I remember just sitting down on the cover and watching the blood flow. At that point I started breathing really heavy and passed out. At some point in time I must have woken up and called 911. The next thing I knew I was in the intensive care unit with three I.V.’s in me.”

According to Barb Medlock, coordinator of the Portage Path Support Hotline, suicidal feelings happen when the person is in crisis. “A suicidal person usually has overwhelming emotional pain, which they try to cope with as best they can by using their support system and the skills they’ve used to cope with problems in the past. When this doesn’t work, the focus on the pain increases and the person becomes less and less able to see alternatives to their problems. Suicidal thoughts may occur to the person as a possible solution.”

At St. Thomas Hospital, Ben realized that he wasn’t the only person who has had suicidal feelings. It was there he learned about Intensive Treatment Services at

Portage Path Behavioral Health, a partial hospitalization program that helps individuals who need care that is more structured than outpatient, but less restrictive than inpatient. Ben was also given a personal counselor and a psychiatrist.

Even after his release from St. Thomas, Ben wasn’t quite out of danger.

“I went home, but I was feeling bad, so I called the Support Hotline. I then went to Portage Path Psychiatric Emergency Services and spoke with a nurse for an hour and felt a lot better. She reminded me that things don’t clear up just overnight, they take some time.”

For the past 3 years, Ben has been working with his counselor and psychiatrist and is has gotten his issues under control.

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“Right now, I am feeling the best I have ever felt in my whole life. My treatment team has taught me how to relax and take better care of myself,” says Ben with excitement.

Today, Ben volunteers 10-15 hours a week for various organizations throughout the city of Akron. This spring he plans to visit his sister and brother-in-law in southern Ohio, as well as begin working outside on planting his garden.

If someone you know is exhibiting signs of severe depression or suicide, encourage them to call the Portage Path Support Hotline at 330-434-9144. The hotline is confidential, anonymous, and free, and offers supportive listening 24-hours a day.

“Most people who are suicidal or attempt suicide do not want to die, but are desperately trying to escape from their emotional pain,” says Medlock. “The best intervention is to take all talk about suicide seriously and try to establish a connection with the person so that they can get professional assistance, which helps a person get through this difficult time.”

Last year, 54 Summit County residents took their own lives. Hundreds, maybe even thousands of others attempted to. You can help prevent suicide by learning the warning signs.