

One step at a time

Kathryn's story

I had a manic breakdown about 6 years ago. My ex-boyfriend was living in the same block of flats as me and I had issued him with a trespass order. This made me very unpopular. I was being watched and had bigoted comments thrown at me.

My breakdown started with a fear of roads and stairs. I told my son we'd go to Pizza Hut for dinner but despite the strong incentive of an upset son, I just couldn't cross the street. I couldn't even get up the stairs to my flat. I went on my hands and knees, but ended up lying across the stairs unable to move. I was terrified I'd fall. The neighbours called an ambulance. I had no name for what was happening to me and there was no help.

After that my sister gained custody of my son, so I moved to New Plymouth to be closer to him. It was then that everything got on top of me and I was admitted to hospital. When I got out I went to stay with a woman I met.

My bipolar became odd hypomania. I heard inconsequential voices too. Soon my primary diagnosis became an anxiety disorder rather than bipolar. I couldn't walk from one lamp-post to the next. Grocery shopping with my flatmate was a nightmare. On payday my flatmate would go to the dairy to get my smokes for me. I became trapped in the flat as Risperidone exacerbated my eyelid spasms and I was scared I'd fall down the steps. I couldn't bring washing in or put rubbish bags out. I panicked about showers. I couldn't even boil the jug. My son dislocated his shoulder and I had to visit him in a wheelchair.

I would stay in my room, despondent and alone. I didn't do any housework and wouldn't have known how. I was too down to notice it was all getting on top of me.

It is hard to adequately describe what a panic attack is like. I can't function. I am as terrified, as if faced by a fire or a wild predator. I can't move because I'm afraid I'll fall. I feel light-headed and faint. My heart pounds and my palms sweat.

I went to Pathways for respite. A staff member there put essential oils in my bath and I had a foot spa. Another staff member took me to get fish and chips. I took comfort in having a break in supportive company, away from my miserable circumstances.

It was still very early days but I made a start at gauging my anxiety levels about certain things and identifying which coping strategies helped. I used a microwave and got to eat, therefore meals became stress-free. Staff watched while I boiled the jug. I relaxed and felt a bit optimistic.

Almost as soon as I got home I was back to square one. I was then admitted to Pathways' supported residential accommodation. I lived at Pathways for two years. I enjoyed making friends with my peers and the feeling of community. Staff helped me out of the bath. An occupational therapist gave me a shower stool and a tea trolley so I could manage coffee and hot meals with my tremors.



I learned to be more observant and appreciate a higher standard of housework. I was able to stay in a stable environment while staff supported me through an episode of mania. They listened. Staff stood observing to help me gain confidence in using the oven.

It was always the walking where my progress was slow. I was so afraid of walking from my unit to the office, I arranged for another resident to unobtrusively accompany me. I was so convinced I couldn't do it that I resented staff for 'forcing' me to walk to the letterbox. Now I realise they were laying the foundation for what I am doing now.

I was banned from a supermarket for having panic attacks and not being able to complete my shopping, so, for months, the staff tolerantly accompanied me to another supermarket. Pathways staff showed a lot more faith in my walking and motivation than I had.

For a long time I spent many secret tearful nights ringing around boarding houses but always knowing I was helpless to move on. Then I happened upon a church. I gained some strength to at least try and go out. I have been in my own house since August 2007.

I have a team who support me including Deb* and Kate* from Pathways and Rachel*. They are all awesome. I'm taking advantage of their support to get back where I used to be, with walking as my main form of transport. Their sense of humour means it's not all 'poor me' and 'this is so hard'. I feel quite close to them as we journey together.

Now we are practising for when I do all my shopping by myself. Rachel takes me for a walk. I cross a small side road by myself to buy my veges at the green grocers and then walk to the zebra crossing to meet her on the other side.

I have practised actually getting on and off the bus with Deb. Our medium term goal is for me to walk to catch the bus, meet Deb in town and then we're all going for a coffee. Going to town on the bus will greatly add to my freedom and independence. These people have also provided me with invaluable support with WINZ and hospital appointments.

About two years ago a physio gave me a walking stick as a support. This has long been a bone of contention as there is nothing physically wrong with my legs, but I have become quite dependant and feel a bit off balance without it. To help, every week Kate takes me for a walk to the bus stop. She stays beside me. We put books in my backpack to practise for shopping. I'm really enjoying actually holding my stick and getting some real exercise. Kate takes me to 'Cook for Less' classes too. I really enjoy it. Other than the Like Minds support group meeting and sometimes church, it's my only social outing as I live a fair way from town. When I can get to the bus I will be able to go to Women's Centre and support groups. I am in the process of applying for level 1 science as part of my eventual goal to qualify as a naturopath.

I still have complete mental blocks about some things, despite knowing a feeling can't hurt me. To try to cope I divide the foot path into small landmarks, listen to my walkman or carry on a conversation, I connect with God by singing Amazing Grace, and I deep breathe and use affirmations. I also avoid coffee - once the brain has learned how to have a panic attack, it reproduces it at any similar stimuli.

My son is now 17. He's lived with my sister since he was 12. He is my best friend and we go for walks together.

* Names have been changed