

Access to Treatment

Rebecca Müller



What is the most important for the successful treatment from the patient's perspective: a personal experience from Belgium.

Become an expert in your disorder

Importance of knowing what it is you have – this is essential in dealing with your illness: know everything you can about your disorder – find all kind information on it – give it a name: this was very important in my experience.. Get to know your own early onset symptoms to try and avoid relapse and hospitalization. Do not ignore your illness: accept it for better and for worse. Due to my illness I lost my job as an Art Historian and I had to follow a job reorientation training in order to be able to find work again. Now I work as a secretary in an international and multilingual environment. My current employers and bosses are not aware of my history as a bipolar patient because of the stigma attached to psychiatric illnesses. But as I am completely stable now it is not necessary to mention it and I do not say anything about it to them. Only my family, friends and self help colleagues know about this.

Acceptance is key

Accepting that you have a psychiatric illness and taking this into account in your daily life: put a certain structure/routine in your daily life, try to avoid stress, sleep enough, take your medication. Accept that you have to take medication – do not resist taking medication. Due to bad acceptance of diagnosis people do not change their life and sometimes even stop with their medication. This often causes relapses and slows down recovery. Accepting and asking help is essential. Finding help quickly is key to a good prognosis. Finding help is not always easy and sometimes you have to take many barriers to find it.

Self Help groups can help you with accepting your disorder.

This kind of support is very important: to know that you are not alone – get support from other people who have the same problems – finding real understanding – in the group everybody knows what you are talking about from their own experience. Active involvement in Ups & Downs helped me in regaining confidence in myself and my abilities. Of course every patient has his or her own story and experiences. For some people the previous life style is not possible to maintain once they have fallen ill, but others can return to their jobs and take up their normal lives again. All patients have to deal with the loss of their healthy self – with the loss of their idea of themselves. They have to accept that their personality is not stable and fixed, but has been broken and shattered by mental illness. Picking up the pieces and putting this self back together is the biggest challenge of all!

Be in charge of your own rehabilitation process.

Question your treatment and look into all possible options. Speak with your psychiatrist about your medication and address side effects that diminish your life quality. Get a second opinion if needed but also give your doctor a chance to get to know you better. Be open to advice and criticism as it is not easy to look in the mirror and realize that you need to change some essential things about who you are and what you do with your life. Psychotherapy is very helpful but is also quite intense. Being in charge is very hard when you are really ill. Sometimes you are too depressed to step up and take the necessary action. This is why you need people around you who can support you: family, friends, self-help group and sympathetic psychiatrist and psychologist.

Never give up hope! When you are really badly clinically depressed you think that you never will get better. You cannot see any future for yourself and you are stuck in the terrible isolation of depression. In these moments it is important to have a supporting environment who ensures a certain level of connection to life. Then they have to tell you and show you that hope is not dead and that you will get better eventually.

The experience of my illness and the rehabilitation has brought me a lot of self knowledge. I think I have become a better person through this experience. I have become aware of the fact that mental illness can touch us all. We are all vulnerable human beings trying to get by in a chaotic world. My illness has brought home to me some essential truths that I believe are important to all of us. I have realized that people and social contacts are worth much more than all material riches in the world. I am convinced that I have become a better listener than before. Now I give people the benefit of the doubt and think that all of us may have problems, issues and illnesses that we keep hidden from others. I have lost the innocence that I had before when I was still untouched by pain, loss and grief. The experience of my illness has changed me in some essential way and in retrospect I would not want to have missed this unique experience. I have become the person I am now through this experience and I can now fully appreciate the positive aspects that my suffering has had. This positive attitude is really essential as it has allowed me to move on and rebuild my life.

Rebecca, Ups & Downs, Belgium