

From Darkness to Light:



A Journey Through Mental Illness and Recovery

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Introduction

In this deeply personal and inspiring eBook, Eric Hunken shares his life story, marked by struggles with mental illness, substance abuse, and the long, arduous journey toward recovery. Eric's story is one of resilience, hope, and the power of community support. Through his candid narrative, he sheds light on the complexities of living with mental illness and offers valuable insights for those who may be facing similar challenges.

I feel very pleased and appreciative to be invited here to speak to you. Hello, My name is Eric Hunken, and I have been "Labeled" or diagnosed with having Bi-Polar Depression, which is a psychiatric diagnosis for a mood disorder in which people experience disruptive mood swings. Major Depressive Disorder is a mental disorder characterized by episodes of all-encompassing low mood accompanied by low self-esteem and loss of interest or pleasure in normally enjoyable activities.

Borderline Personality, is a personality disorder - a prolonged disturbance of personality, characterized by a depth of moods. that really affect thought and interpersonal relations. This instability in my moods, black-and-white thinking, chaotic and unstable interpersonal relationships, issues with self-image, my own identity, and behavior; as well as my sense of self. Self-harm and suicidal ideation. Suicide Ideation is a medical term for thoughts about or an unusual preoccupation with suicide and self-harm.

Those are the labels a doctor gave me. There are many other labels people have put on me due to the nature of my how I have lived my life. The label I prefer is Person.

I'd like to give you a snapshot of what my life has been like. It's a big picture because I'm old.

Well, For most of my life, I thought I was just messed up! I was diagnosed after I was 40 years old. I'm 58 now, I was a very happy child, almost too happy. My mood, and my life changed drastically after several instances. First after I was hit on the head with a 23 lb. shotput when I was 9 years of age. Prior to that, I was a very happy boy. That experience put me in a coma for a while. I was always quick to anger and moody growing up.

I had a very anxious and unhappy young life. Like many people, I come from an alcoholic and abusive home. After being raped at 14 and again sexually assaulted at 15, I was quite a mess and had no idea how to deal with the enormous negative feelings I was dealing with. This was the time of my first suicide attempt. I had one appointment with a Psychiatrist who told me and my parents I would grow out of this. Pot and alcohol, then seemed to be my answer at that time.

Over the years still not knowing what was wrong with me and why I behaved the way I did, I went through many relationships, friendships and over 50 jobs. Sometimes an Employer or a friend would mention to me that they didn't know which Eric I was from week to week. I first got married and had children at the age of 30. Alcohol had quite a lot to do with that. I ended up getting divorced and raising my children myself from the ages of 4 and 5 until their late teens.

Alcohol and pot still my
being best friends. I believe
now that I am completely
clean from any drugs that
the drugs inhibited my ability
to make good choices for
myself.

After a major car accident, I
fell into a deep depression.
Before my car accident, I
was very involved in my
children's life. Always on
P.A.C., I was a volunteer at
the Aldergrove Community
Police office. and other
various volunteer work
while working. While in the
deep depression, I got
involved with the hard
drugs.

I lost my ability to see life as valuable and was unable to cope. My Children had to be looked after by grandparents and later their mother. I had several run-ins with the police due to my lack of judgment due to the drugs and despair. I made another suicide attempt.

This time I was committed to the Hospital for 28 days. While in the hospital I was assigned a great Psych doctor, which is rare in my opinion.

He spent a lot of time talking with me, also very rare and eventually gave me my diagnosis. Initially, I was glad there was something I could Tag what I was, that spoke to why I acted the way I did. I was medicated right away and talked with my doctor every week for a while and I seemed to stabilize while having constant attention.

The doctor though, convinced me that I would always be sick and that I should never go back to work and just try to cope with life as quietly as I can.

While I was glad to hear there were reasons for what had been happening to me, dealing with what the doctor said and with the stigma of mental illness with my family and friends really bothered me. My Family and my friends shunned me and asked me to not be so public about having a mental illness. So while on the medication and getting support, I was doing fairly well. Eventually the support fell away and I stopped using my medications and began to use meth, crack, acid, extacy, alcohol, pot, shrooms and really whatever I could get my hands on instead.

I loved the drugs and still crave them sometimes. Of course, I began a series of poor choices. I had totally lost my family, and my kids, and only had my friends that I used with. After some particularly heavy use of meth, crack and acid, I tried to kill myself again. I wasn't successful, and I was committed to the psych ward again for another 28 days after spending a couple of weeks in intensive care.

After I came out of the Hospital, I made the right choice to get free of the hard drugs, so my girlfriend and I decided to move to Chilliwack to get away from all our drug friends. I still used the hard stuff a little bit but pot and alcohol were still

a big part of my life at this point. I married again, made another suicide attempt and ended up in intensive care again and yet another 28-day stint in the Psych Ward.

My experiences in the
Physch ward which are
colored by my black and
white thinking I'll admit,
include trying to find help for
whatever is causing my
depression and how to get
out of it. I've always wanted
to feel quote "Normal".

After all the previous times
at various Physch wards, I
was released and told to
make my way in the world.
without any plans of
support. This last time in
Chilliwack at the Physch
ward I met a woman who
was an activity worker. not
just a nurse or doctor.

She treated me like a human being and told me that I was valuable as such. For some reason because of the way she treated me. I began to believe her. This is where my journey of recovery started. After leaving the psych ward, I came back to what was called the Day program where I began my journey of recovery. The social worker then referred me to two places that have had enormous impact on my recovery.

Various programs at Mental Health. The programs such as Anger management, Relaxation, where great tools that propelled me to recovery.

I was also referred to The Cheamview Mental Health Club House on Mary Street in Chilliwack, wonderfully run by the Creative Center Society. The Creative Center Society's Clubhouse has been the most significant catalyst for me to my mental health recovery.

Getting involved with the Cheamview clubhouse I began to take responsibility for my own recovery and getting support from the wonderful and caring staff there. Getting involved in their programs. Programs such as their Employment program. The Camera Club, walking programs, I ran several programs like Karaoke night and a Talking tobacco support group. Outdoor adventure etc.

One of the best programs I got involved in there was the Mental Health Stand Up Comedy Program. Where I got out of my shy self. and learned to speak in public through laughter. The Partnership program which is what is happening now. I feel like a real person and take charge of my wellness.

Taking medication seems to be important for me. It's been a lot of trial and error to get the right meds, I still don't know if I'm on the right combination. Psychiatrists are really only interested in managing my medication to make me manageable and are not available for any other kind of therapy. I don't have a Psychiatrist right now, there are only three available in Chilliwack for about 85,000 people.

Id also like to point out I really believe in taking as much help as available. Each and every program helps propel me to wellness. Other Programs along the way that have really contributed to my wellness including The W.R.A.P. program and the Wellness and Recovery program run by Communitas.

I also need to mention The Salvation Army. While attending a meeting to apply for the food bank to get food because of course what little Disability money I got each month had to go to Pot, cigarettes, alcohol, meth, crack etc. before there was room for food. I had priorities back then, misguided though, they were.

luckily. I talked to a counsellor and in a couple of days, I was taken to Miracle Valley Rehab Center in Mission for a 90 day program of Life Skills. I am so thankful for that opportunity. I came out of that experience 90 days clean from any hard drugs. My wife and I are no longer together as she didn't want to leave that lifestyle.

Later, Here in Chilliwack, I fell into despair several times and made several suicide attempts.

Eventually I saw that I needed to be clean from pot, alcohol and cigarettes as well, and I have been clean from everything for 2 years now. It's still a daily struggle to keep away from all these drugs! I haven't been to the food bank for 2 years now as I can now afford to feed myself.

Things really started to get positive in my life as I quit the drugs and went to a lot of support activities. Being able to talk things out with other people that are dealing with the same things I deal with helps immensely. I really wish I had really reached out for help much earlier in my life, If only I knew it existed.

Perhaps if a friend or family member would have had the knowledge of what was happening to me when I was young and directed me to help earlier, who knows what I could have accomplished by now.

It's taken me a long time for my life to get as good as it is right now. I'm still working on it. Now I live in socialized housing Called "The Village" which offers reduced rent in a clean supportive environment which endeavours to be crime and drug free which really helps me to stay healthy.

I'm not working at present but I am looking for work and thinking about going back to school. I try to keep active. I spend a lot of time on the computer and have several Websites that I run I live on a \$900 a month Dollar disability income from the Govnt. Thank you to all the Taxpayers!

I believe that its been me, my attitude of wanting to be healthy in all ways that has propelled me to seek help, accept help and follow the methods that have helped me get better.

I still have some periodic difficulties. I am always on the edge of a depressive episode in which I still have suicidal thoughts. Because of where I live and the support around me , I'm push myself to get involved in life. Speaking publicly, doing stand up comedy , (I recently appeared at Yuk Yuks in Vancouver which was Awesome!) I'm managing to stay clean and working on staying healthy.

I am Eric, I am a person, I am not my illness, my illness affects my life. I don't have Cancer, I have a mental illness and I have to deal with it.

Thank you for your time, I hope I've given you some insight into the mind of this depressed person.

Chapter 1: The Labels We Carry

Eric begins by discussing the various labels that have been placed on him throughout his life, bipolar depression, major depressive disorder, borderline personality disorder, and more. He reflects on how these diagnoses, while helpful in some ways, also came with stigma and misunderstanding. Eric emphasizes that while these labels describe his condition, they do not define who he is. He prefers to be seen simply as a person, not as a collection of symptoms or disorders.

Key Takeaways:

Mental health
diagnoses are tools
for understanding, but
they do not define a
person.

The stigma
surrounding mental
illness can be as
damaging as the illness
itself.

It's important to see
beyond the labels and
recognize the humanity
in everyone.

Chapter 2: A Childhood Interrupted

Eric recounts his early years, marked by a traumatic brain injury at the age of nine, which drastically altered his mood and behavior. He describes growing up in an alcoholic and abusive household, and the profound impact of being sexually assaulted as a teenager. These experiences left him feeling lost, angry, and disconnected from the world around him.

Key Takeaways:
Childhood trauma can
have long-lasting
effects on mental
health.

Early intervention and
support are crucial
for those who have
experienced trauma.

Understanding the
root causes of mental
health struggles can
be a key step toward
healing

Chapter 3: The Spiral of Self-Destruction\par

Eric's story takes a darker turn as he describes his descent into substance abuse and self-destructive behaviour. He shares how alcohol and drugs became his coping mechanisms, leading to a series of failed relationships, lost jobs, and multiple suicide attempts. Despite his best efforts to find stability, Eric found himself trapped in a cycle of despair

Key Takeaways:

Substance abuse often masks deeper emotional pain.

The cycle of addiction and mental illness can be incredibly difficult to break.

Support from loved ones and professionals is essential during this time.

Chapter 4: A Glimmer of Hope

After a particularly severe suicide attempt, Eric was hospitalised and finally received a proper diagnosis. While this was a turning point, he also faced the harsh reality of living with a chronic mental illness.

He discusses the challenges of finding the right medication and the limitations of psychiatric care, particularly in underserved areas.

Key Takeaways:

Proper diagnosis and treatment are critical for managing mental illness.

The healthcare system often falls short in providing comprehensive mental health care.

Medication can be a helpful tool, but it is not a cure-all.

Chapter 5: The Power of Community

Eric's journey took a positive turn when he discovered the Cheamview Mental Health Clubhouse, run by the Creative Center Society.

Here, he found a supportive community that treated him with dignity and respect. Through various programs, including anger management, outdoor adventures, and even stand-up comedy, Eric began to take charge of his own recovery.

Key Takeaways:

Community support is a powerful catalyst for recovery.

Engaging in meaningful activities can help rebuild self-esteem and purpose.

Recovery is a collaborative effort that requires both personal commitment and external support.

Chapter 6: Breaking Free from Addiction

Eric's path to recovery was not linear. He faced numerous setbacks, including relapses and further suicide attempts. However, with the help of programs like Miracle Valley Rehab Center and the Salvation Army, he was able to break free from hard drugs and eventually quit alcohol, pot, and cigarettes. He emphasises the importance of taking responsibility for his own recovery and seeking out every available resource.

Key Takeaways:

Recovery from addiction is a lifelong process.

Relapse is a common part of the journey, but it does not mean failure.

Support from rehabilitation programs and peer groups can make a significant difference.

Chapter 7: Living with Mental Illness

Eric reflects on the ongoing challenges of living with mental illness, including the constant threat of depressive episodes and suicidal thoughts. He discusses the importance of staying active, seeking out support, and maintaining a positive attitude. Despite the difficulties, Eric has found ways to thrive, including public speaking and stand-up comedy.

Key Takeaways:

Mental illness is a chronic condition that requires ongoing management

Staying engaged in life and seeking out support are crucial for maintaining mental health.

Finding joy and purpose in life can help counteract the effects of depression.

Chapter 8: A Message of Hope

In the final chapter, Eric offers a message of hope to those who may be struggling with mental illness or addiction. He emphasizes that recovery is possible, even in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds. He encourages readers to seek help, accept support, and never give up on themselves.

Key Takeaways:

Recovery is a journey,
not a destination.

It's never too late to seek
help and make positive
changes in your life.

With the right support
and mindset, it is possible
to live a fulfilling life despite
mental illness.

Conclusion

Eric's story is a powerful reminder that mental illness does not have to define a person's life.

Through his journey, he has shown that it is possible to overcome even the most daunting challenges with the right support, determination, and self-compassion. This eBook is a testament to the resilience of the human spirit and a call to action for greater understanding and support for those living with mental illness.

Resources

Mental Health Hotlines:

If you or someone you know is struggling with mental health, reach out to a local hotline or crisis center.

Support Groups:

Consider joining a support group for mental health or addiction recovery.

Rehabilitation Centers:
Explore local rehab programs that offer life skills and addiction recovery support.

Community Programs:
Look for community-based mental health programs, such as clubhouses or wellness centers, that offer a range of activities and support services.

About the Author

Eric Hunken is a mental health advocate, public speaker, and stand-up comedian. He has dedicated his life to sharing his story in the hopes of inspiring others to seek help and find hope in their own journeys. Eric continues to live in Chilliwack, British Columbia, where he remains active in his community and continues to work on his recovery every day.

Note: This eBook is based on a speech given by Eric Hunkken on January 6, 2012. It has been adapted and expanded to provide a comprehensive guide for those seeking to understand mental illness and recovery.