

“You Really Have to Want to Claw Your Way Back Up Again”

Interviewer: (G)

Interviewee: (M)

M is a loving mother of three, originally a journalist, but now a practicing CNA. Throughout M's life, she has faced a multitude of loss and difficulty. During her divorce, she attempted suicide and struggled with chronic depression. She was treated in a hospital and learned to turn her life around. She began to focus on the positives in life and was able to get back on track. She changed her career path and became an advocate for suicide awareness and prevention. Now, almost 6 years after her attempt, she is a fun loving, energetic person who tries to get the most out of her life.

G – Before we start, I want to thank you for sharing your story with me today. I know that it can't be easy. I just want to start by asking you to pinpoint an event in your life that you would categorize as a crisis of meaning. If you need me to define that for you I would be happy to.

M – There is a lot in my life where I have had to question my meaning, but I think the biggest one is when I attempted suicide. It was a rough time for me, it all started with my divorce. All of a sudden I found myself with a family breaking apart, no job, and I had to figure out some way to support myself and three kids. I think it was too much to handle all at once and I fell into a depression. As the days went on I lost more and more motivation to get out of bed and do simple things. The closer the time came for my soon-to-be-ex-husband to move out, the more paralyzed and terrified of living I became. I think after a while the sadness and darkness that hung over me just became too much and I didn't want to keep going. I didn't think about how it would impact other people or anything, I just felt like such a burden to everyone that the only way to solve my problems was to end my life, so one day I took as many sleeping pills as I had left. Luckily my ex found me and got me to a hospital in time.

G - Why do you think that you thought that was your only solution? Why do you think you reacted to this meaninglessness in the way that you did? Could you elaborate on that please?

M - It's hard to say. When you are in that place of depression, there isn't much logic that goes into your thoughts. You just think the worst of yourself and assume others feel the same way. I later realized that I was prone to depression, which was definitely a factor. Had I known that, I could have gotten the help I needed before it reached that level. Unfortunately, I didn't have the coping skills that I needed and at the time it was the only thing I could think of in that state of mind.

G - When you say "in that state of mind" what do you mean? Do you remember any thoughts or events that brought you there?

M - I was in an extreme state of lack of hope. I felt like I didn't have anyone or anything there for me, when I had my kids and my family right in front of me. It was just so hard to be logical when it felt like there was a darkness behind every thought. I think I suffered from a lack of gratitude and appreciation for what I did have, all I could focus on was what I didn't have. When your thoughts are like this it's easy to slip into the state that I did.

G - I think I want to move into discussing your process of recovery. I understand with this it's not only a matter of short-term recovery, but also of long-term. Could you share some of the methods that helped you both directly after the attempt as well as in the long term?

M - Directly after the attempt I was admitted to the psychiatric ward in our local hospital. There is where a lot of my immediate recovery began. I did a lot of self-analysis, a lot of group therapy sessions as well as one on one therapy. I have to say I

learned a lot there. It was not the most pleasant of places, but without it I don't know where I would be. There were a lot of activities that we did to try to learn to cope. For example, I made this small paper box and inside we had to put things that made us happy or could calm us down. That way when we were feeling anxious or depressed we could go through the box to remind us of what we had. Inside I had a lot of little trinkets that reminded me of my kids. We also learned strategies like if we were catastrophizing about the future, we had to stop and focus on the exact moment we were in, naming things we noticed with each of our senses. There were a lot of things like that we learned. Over the long-term is much more difficult. It was a process. I had to really figure out a lot about how my mind worked and how to counteract the negative. It was like there was a tape of negative thoughts in my head that I had to turn around. I really had to acknowledge the hopeless feelings and figure out how to move forward from them.

G - Would you say there was a difference in your attitudes or thoughts before and after the attempts?

M - That's a tough question, I'm not sure completely how to answer that. I guess I would say that in the years before the attempt, I was just living my life unaware. I didn't know I had the potential for this depression, I didn't know I had a divorce on the way. I think now I have a little more insight into the importance of my life. When you get so close to giving away your life you realize what you have. I think I'm much more positive now. I appreciate my life and the people in it and I try to have fun. I try to make the most of my days. I think it's important to stay in that mind frame.

G - Do you think that this event changed you at all? And if so, were they positive for you?

M - I think this has a lot to do with who I am now. It has made me more resilient and I became passionate about spreading the importance of suicide awareness. It has become

a very important and personal topic to me and I have since then wanted to make a difference. That is definitely a positive that came out of it. I can't say I am the same person as I was from before the attempt, but that's not a bad thing. I am happy with how far I've come and where I have ended up.

G - Would you say that having been through this you have become a better person? Despite it being such a difficult event, do you think there was any positive outcome from it?

M - I think overall it has made me a more empathetic person. It has made me more aware of the problems other people could be going through in life. I also think it has made me stronger as a person. I can say that I've been to the depths and climbed back up again. There's a lot that life has thrown at me since then, yet somehow I am always able to pull through and I'm proud of how far I have come.

G - Finally I just want to ask if you would have any advice for someone going through a similar time.

M - That's a tough one. I could offer advice, but I'm not a therapist. I think most importantly, get help. There is always someone you can go to for help, professional or not. It's just hard to offer advice because when you're in that dark place, you really have to want to claw your way back up again. If you don't want recovery, you won't reach it. Some other advice I could give is what I tried to do in the long term. Get outside yourself and do things for others, focus on the positive in life like your family and friends and it's important to recognize that if you feel one way today, you won't always feel that way.

G - Thank you so much for sitting and talking with me today. I know that it isn't an easy thing to share a story like this, but I want you to know that your strength and resilience is inspiring.

M – I am happy to share my story with you today. Depression and suicide is a big issue in America today. I want people to know that they are not alone. There is always somewhere they can go to get help.

Comments:

It was really powerful listening to M talk about her suicide attempts. I have heard about it before, yet each time I learn something new and admire her more for what she has been through. As she was talking about some of the strategies she learned, like redirecting her thought processes, I thought a lot about the stoics. I think it was similar how her therapists were trying to teach her to direct her thoughts in a more positive way and not to let things trigger her into negativity, to how the stoics try to live their lives unbothered by outside events. She learned to control how she reacts to outside forces instead of blaming outside forces for how she reacts and I think this is similar to the stoic mind frame. Also, from past discussions with her, I know that she was in CBT, which I think originated from the stoic way of thinking. I liked being able to connect so directly to what I was hearing from her life, to what we had learned in class.

As she was describing her recovery process I was also reminded slightly of the Buddhist ideals. Buddhists recognize that there is suffering in the world, but it is very practical in its teachings. When she was describing her method to focus on details that each of her senses felt in a given moment, I connected it to Buddhism. In both instances, they are in the present moment, aware of their surroundings, not worried about the future or the past. It's a simplicity that I think helped her calm down in situations where she felt overwhelmed.

Overall, I am glad I chose M for this interview. I have heard her story many times, I even lived it, but each time I learn something new. She has always been an inspiration to me for going through so much pain and trouble, yet pulling through every time. I

feel closer having had this experience with her and I aspire to be as strong and resilient as she is.