

Stability is Elusive for Those Living with Mental Illness and Limited Funds

TRENTON

Bob's therapist encouraged him to try to stay positive. So he wrote in his journal about all the things he could do when spring arrived. "I can fish... I can go to church... I can play miniature golf." Unfortunately, it was not always that easy. When darker moods dominated, he wrote about nightmares, the "pain of wishing I could change things" and a poem titled "Lost in Life's Fog is What it is Like."

"Lost in Life's Fog is What it is Like"

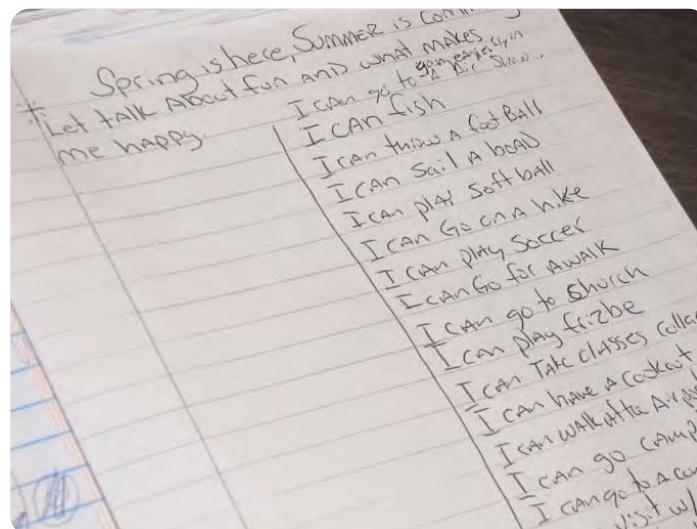


Bob suffered from schizophrenia. He recounted the various events in his life that might have contributed to his illness: the molestation he endured as a teen; the head injury he survived, which resulted in a 14-day coma. Maybe he simply inherited the condition from his grandmother. Whatever the cause, he just wished for a normal life—and, at 41, his life was anything but normal.

After a major psychotic episode at 19, Bob was institutionalized at a nearby psychiatric hospital for 11 months. Upon his release, he received SSI disability for a time until he chose to try to work and voluntarily terminated his

SSI benefits. He did work, although usually not for long periods of time. The longest job he held was for four years with a landscaping company. While working one job at a grocery store, he met the woman who would become his wife and the mother of his three children.

Unfortunately, the jobs Bob was able to find did not always offer insurance benefits, and it proved difficult to access the treatment and medications he needed. He did his best to continue with his psychotropic medications throughout those years, and reports going as far as purchasing medication over the Internet when necessary to try to manage his illness on his own. But when the financial stressors became too great (among them, a credit report that revealed an outstanding bill for hospital care, of which he was unaware, just as he and his wife were about to close on his new home), his loosely knit system of symptom management began to unravel. His delusional symptoms worsened, although he didn't realize it at the time, and, after 13 years of marriage, his wife declared that she "couldn't take care of him anymore."



The normal life Bob had worked years to achieve evaporated in a fraction of that time. He returned to his home town and moved into his father's house. He began attending a partial care program daily, participating in educational classes and group therapy to try to

heal—again—and to rebuild some of the stability he had for a while. As he shuffled through his papers, Bob explained that, in his therapy group, the group members get to vote on things they want to learn about or work on. A sampling of topics included “living with chronic conditions; rules for creating positive affirmations; new ways of thinking; anger management plans; self-motivation; and using medication effectively.” He had a strong support network at the program and, with the support of staff and friends he had made, he had begun to paint and write poetry. Unfortunately, the short-term disability benefits he received from his previous employer, Walmart, had expired. At the time of



the interview, he had applied for General Assistance (welfare) and Medicaid through the Board of Social Services, while waiting for a decision on his Social Security Disability application, which can take years. If he was approved for General Assistance, he planned to apply for a medical deferral from the work requirement, and hopefully receive \$210/month. More important, though, he needed his Medicaid application to be approved without delay, so that he could continue with the treatment he so desperately needed. The medication alone cost nearly \$1,300 a month, and whatever money he once had was long gone. ❖

Interview completed May 2007

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FOR HELP: Through its [statewide, toll-free hotline, 1-888-LSNJ-LAW \(1-888-576-5529\)](#), Legal Services offers telephone advice to people who have been unfairly denied cash benefits, food stamps, or rental assistance, as well as certain health programs, including Medicaid/NJ Family Care, Charity Care, and PAAD. You may also apply for services online at <https://lsnjlawhotline.org> or contact a [Regional Legal Services program](#) for help.

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