

---

# A Personal Story

## *About Learning and Medication*

**M**y name is Cathy, and I was at the tutor session on medication and learning. I got an idea to write about my experience as a ex-psychiatric patient that was on medication to try to help you all understand our story and life. I am 28 years old and have been in and out of hospitals since I was 19 years old. I've been on and off medication ("meds") and have lived in group homes and hospitals and I'm now on my own.

I've been trying to improve my education for years. Now I would like to help you understand me.

### **Life on Meds**

When I think about meds and what I felt like on them I was so doped up that I couldn't think or see right. It became my only way of life. I was afraid to try other ways. The drugs can be very powerful and can cause you to be very sleepy and you have blurred vision. After about four weeks the side effects become less.

I would see someone getting more drugs and would become jealous and want more. When I was in hospital I would watch the others, act out and copy them. Then I would ask for extra medication and get them.

Drugs become a way of life. Learning was hard. The first few days after a needle, you can feel high and can't come down.

I felt like I lost control of my life. The pills stopped me from feeling and growing. I felt I had lost a lot of my self-esteem. Some people don't feel this way. Some people can get on with their lives. But there are many that can't.

### **Withdrawal**

Sometimes doctors would take people off their meds to try new ones out. They have to wait two weeks before they can start new medications. Some doctors do it slowly and some do it cold turkey. I've been on meds and through cold turkey withdrawal and slow withdrawal. Some people get the shakes and cold sweats and even get sick to their stomach on buses and cars. Some don't feel anything.

There is also a dependency that is all in the head. Getting used to not taking a pill. What I do about that is take a vitamin pill. It helps with that problem.

### **Learning on Meds**

It can be hard to learn new skills because you are so doped up. When I was on meds I only did a little at a time. If I learned a new word that would be great. Now I've been off them for six months. I still feel like I've lost a lot of control in my life. I'm afraid to try new things like school. I feel like I'm getting more control but it takes time. I also feel I'm gaining old skills back.

### **Hints for Tutors**

I feel you as a tutor need to be supportive and look at the good in your student. There is much more going on in your student's lives besides meds. The fear of being homeless, loneliness, fear of hospital and being discharged from a safe place to a cold world.

**BY CATHY JONES & CHRIS BROWN**

The greatest fear I have is losing everything because of a hospitalization. This all can effect learning.

It helps to try to make a lesson around some of these things, like job forms and income tax, budgeting, going to a store and shopping and going out to dinner and learning how to pay a bill, going to a bank, etc. All of this can help to make people like me feel more normal.

It's best to find out when they have had their shot and to set classes two days after it.

Praise is important to your student. It is also important to your student to feel good about their learning and self.

### How We Wrote the Article

The following is from the journal that Cathy and I keep to record her progress.

As homework, Cathy wrote down everything she could remember about her time in hospital. This material was twelve pages long.

When we had our next session we edited this material together. I asked her to list on a separate piece of paper, in point form, all the things she wanted to say. Then I asked her who she wanted to talk to, and, from her list, what the most important item was that she wanted to tell them. We decided that this point would be last, and then together we worked out a

logical way to get to that point using the other items in her list. This is the final order we came up with:

- 1) Introduction.
- 2) Medication. What it's like to be dependent.
- 3) Withdrawal.
- 4) How you lose skills.
- 5) Learning.
- 6) How I learn without medicine.
- 7) Ideas for tutors to help students.

We then read through all of Cathy's notes, cut the pages up with scissors into different topics, and divided these scraps of paper into piles on the table. We put the different piles in the order we wanted them to appear, based on the list we had made, and numbered each pile, so we'd know how to put the article together.

To avoid duplication and still get everything in that Cathy wanted to say, we read through each pile, pulled out sentences that were too much the same, and tried to make each sentence as to-the-point as possible.

We stapled our selected sentences together, then stapled all the piles together in the order we wanted them to be in, and read the story out loud to be sure.

Our last step was to correct the spelling, and the result was an article saying just what Cathy wanted to say. (We used the

words that Cathy had trouble spelling as a spelling test later.)

This was Cathy's first attempt at organizing an essay — previously she wrote down what came into her head, without thinking about what she had just written or wrote after, or what she wanted to accomplish with her story. I'm happy to say that Cathy now can write stories without going through the motion of physically cutting up individual thoughts — she makes her plan before she starts, and mentally puts her sentences and paragraphs together before writing her story.

*Cathy Jones was born in Toronto and grew up in rural Ontario. She now lives in Toronto, and works with a tutor at East End Literacy. She also has been active in various groups and the Evaluation Committee at East End, and contributes stories to their student-written publication. In addition, she now attends upgrading classes at Monseigneur Fraser School, where she is working on Grades 9, 10 and 11. Cathy is very proud of the fact that she has been off drugs for a year.*

*Chris Brown grew up on a farm in Uxbridge, Ontario, and now works for a film company in Toronto, doing internal communications. She took the volunteer tutor training course in the fall of 1987 and has been working with Cathy since then. She is also a member of the East End Literacy Press committee.*

## CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

### Anthology of Canadian Women's Feminist Humour

Parodic, burlesque, bawdy, bold, brazen, playful, satirical, irreverent, brilliant, carnivalesque, bad girl, brash, ironic: poems, stories, jokes, sketches, theories, short essays, drawings, cartoons, photographs, journal entries, stamps, songs, postcards, lists, catalogues, documents, found things, letters, headlines, undercurrents, marginalia.

New work especially encouraged. Exceptional previously published or exhibited work considered. Send images and manuscripts by **1 April 1989** with S.A.S.E. and one line bio to:

Janice Williamson  
Department of English  
University of Alberta  
Edmonton, Alberta T6G 2E5