

## ***A Story of Recovery from Felicia, Owner of The Urban Taste, and MHA Employment Services Participant***

I was raised in a small family in a big, urban city. Our familial culture as it is in most African-American families is to guard your privacy and sadly, ignore or minimize those truths that don't look so good; anything that is associated with a negative stigma means you should look the other way.

My diagnosis of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, Generalized Anxiety Disorder and panic attacks was confirmed two years ago but I have known since I was about 16 that what I was experiencing wasn't normal. But, because of how I was socialized and the stigma surrounding mental health in the African-American community, I minimized it and didn't seek help.

Imagine being at home feeling great, dancing to songs on your iPod when all of a sudden you feel your mood and energy levels plummet like someone is sucking the life out of you; your heart starts beating really fast, you feel like you can't breathe because your chest is tightening up and now you're hyperventilating; you feel light headed and the room starts spinning; at this point you're scared and don't know what to do; you're shaking or if you're me, you're already crouched in a corner cradling yourself and feeling totally detached from yourself and the world. All this happens in a matter of 60 seconds. I chalked up these incidents as lack of sleep, not eating enough, or as my family would say, "being overdramatic". I know now that what I was experiencing were anxiety and panic attacks.



At the age of 24 is when I really started to work on personal development and got serious about having a healthy and balanced lifestyle. I recognized that I wasn't fulfilled emotionally in certain areas of my life. I needed to face and deal with issues from my past that were interfering in being the best person I could be, and I made the decision to go to counseling. After making that decision more than 3 years ago, I'm proud to say that I diligently still attend counseling. It has been so gratifying to center myself and let go of a lot of mental toxic waste that was holding me back. I learned so many good things about myself.

Mental Health America gave me an outlet and network to connect to. If you haven't figured out by now, this is the first time I'm publicly sharing what I've been struggling with for the past 13 years. My family, closest friends, etc don't know about my struggles, only my therapist and the MHA network do. They have been very influential and instrumental in not only giving me the courage to share my story but to also recognize that they are just like me and everybody else;

normal people living life to the best of their ability. People with mental illness just have an extra obstacle to contend with like others may have the obstacle of being a single parent or not earning enough income or not having a car to get to work on time. We all have a struggle.



MHA helped me expand my wine business, The Urban Taste, by securing a grant from the state of Kentucky. The self-employment program that I participated in was set up for people like me; individuals who wanted to be successful, productive citizens but needed a little help. The process actually helped me to lean on my support system. I couldn't have succeeded if I didn't recognize that and allow the good people of MHA who were just like me to help me.

I was able to better manage my anxiety and panic attacks because I had people who I could talk to who would help me by offering me their kind words, sharing their experiences and checking up on me frequently to make sure I didn't retreat, withdraw and give up. I definitely couldn't have come to terms with my struggles if it weren't for them.

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