Mental illness is a coping mechanism

By Laurie Ahern

Mental illness is a coping mechanism. We know for sure that victims of horrendous childhood sexual abuse, most often by a family member from whom they can't escape, use such coping mechanisms as dissociation (going away in your mind) when they cannot escape physically from the torture. And further down that continuum is multiple personality and amnesia. These are all ingenious and remarkable ways that children learn to survive situations that are intolerable. And many people—without the label of mental illness—use coping mechanisms to survive the stress of everyday life. We use alcohol, drugs, sex, work, exercise, shopping, smoking, eating, gambling—some to excess and some, just enough to take the edge off—but we do use them. In moderation these coping mechanisms are considered socially acceptable; however, going "manic" or becoming "psychotic" is not.

After three years of listening to people call the 800 line at the National Empowerment Center, I must say I have drawn some very strong conclusions. First and foremost, the one thing that is clear to me is that no one calling the National Empowerment Center comes from the "Beaver Cleaver" family. Be it parents, consumers/survivors, siblings, lovers, spouses, or friends, there is always some trauma involved when the story is told: poverty, death of a parent at an early age, abandonment, divorce, incest, alcoholism, drug addiction, neglect, etc. And then the story continues the same. Some time later on in life, always a stressful time in life—off to college, wrestling with sexuality in the teen years, the birth of a child, the death of a parent, a divorce or broken love relationship—it happens. Mania, psychosis, panic attacks, depression, obsessive-compulsive behavior, agoraphobia—these all of a sudden appear in those who have never known such things. Why? Well think about it logically. Trauma may not cause mental illness, but we all have our breaking points. And I think those of us who are not lucky enough or able to find a socially acceptable way of handling our stress, a way that does not too drastically interfere with our day-to-day lives, may end up becoming manic or going psychotic. What better way to leave behind a reality that is too cumulatively painful than to create one of our own...as in psychosis? What better way to feel like we can accomplish and do anything when we are feeling insecure and overwhelmed than becoming manic...where we can do anything and everything? And what better coping mechanism can we find than to wash our hands fifty times a day when we are feeling so unsafe? And if the world has been a cruel and unforgiving place, where but in the safety of your own bedroom, as in agoraphobia, could there be a safer place to be?

Some would say that mental illness runs in families—that it is genetic. When I was growing up, alcohol was the way in which my Irish Catholic family coped. I watched it all my life. So when I ran into trouble in my early twenties, alcohol was the way in which I self-medicated and tried hard to make the pain go away. My girlfriend down the street grew up in an Italian Catholic family. Food was the drug of choice in her home. Whenever anything emotional happened—a death, a birth, a wedding—
food was what was used to stuff the feeling. So when my friend’s husband left her with two small babies when she was 18, she started eating and did not stop until she had gained 50 pounds. And the same is true with so-called mental illness. If you grow up with depression, suicide, mania and psychosis as role models for coping mechanisms, the more likely you may use these as ways to cope when the need arises.

It is not a coincidence that most of the staff at the NEC are trauma survivors-later to be diagnosed with mental illness. But it is also not a coincidence that we have all recovered. We share common ideals and principles that have allowed us to find new coping mechanisms that work in our lives. Drugs, in and of themselves, were not the answer. Electroshock was not the answer. The answer was making it safe for us to come back, and finding a new way to cope with the stress when we did return. You know, if you had a nervous stomach and you went to your doctor, he or she might give you Maalox and Tagamet and tell you to reduce the stress in your life. Well, you could take all the medicine, but if you went home to the car that would not start, the dog who just died, the lover who is cheating on you and the job you hate, you can be pretty sure that your stomach would kick up again-no matter what you take-until you find a new way to cope and deal with the stress in your life.

Mental illness is a coping mechanism, not a disease. And those who know this know that drugs will only fend off the pain for so long and then it comes back again. And it seems to me, the difference between those who recover and those who go on to become chronic, lifelong mental patients are those who are aware of this, those of us who know that a second, third or fourth drug added to our repertoire will not ease the pain. In fact it only increases the pain-when we feel hopeless and helpless. Create a safe space. Find a new way to cope. And I believe you too can recover from your so-called mental illness.