

**Testimony of Amy Smith**  
**Subcommittee on Health, Employment, Labor and Pensions**  
**July 10, 2007 3:00 PM**

Chairman Andrews, Ranking Member Kline, and distinguished Members of the Committee,

My name is Amy Smith and I have lived my life with a serious psychiatric disorder. Most of my life was spent in a murky, confusing ocean of extreme emotions. I cycled in and out of mental hospitals, jail and rather desperate attempts to live a so-called "life".

Looking back to my childhood, I realize now I was already under the influence of mental illness. I remember a time when I was afraid to leave my bed in the morning because I was convinced there was an evil woman clad in flowing black robes and riding a black horse right outside my door that was out to get me. I did not relate to my peers and lived a lonely young life.

As a young adult my disorder, schizoaffective disorder, really blossomed. I had no idea what was happening to me as I became increasingly out of touch with reality and began a dark descent into profound depression. I quickly discovered drugs and alcohol alleviated some of my symptoms. My solution to my difficulties was to stay high and drunk all the time, from the minute I woke up in the morning till I fell asleep at night. I found it increasingly difficult to attend my college classes and consequentially lost my grants, scholarships and loans. I became a drug dealer to support myself, and after I was arrested I became homeless for the first time, living in an abandoned trailer that had no doors or windows in the middle of a large field. The homeless shelters were generally pretty luxurious. I was able to keep a small amount of possessions and didn't have to worry about other homeless people stealing my stuff or attacking me.

One of the characteristics of severe mental illness is it's a very cyclical disorder, and I would experience brief windows of lucidity and clarity from time to time. When I was a young person, I would experience momentous surges of hope, and thinking that all that darkness was lifted at last, I would craft extravagant plans for my life, not realizing that my schemes were grandiose and unachievable. As I became a more seasoned player in life, I would give myself over to my addictions in these times, and just quit trying.

The worst by-product of a severe mental illness, in my opinion, is the debilitating loneliness. Even as a very young child, I could not connect with the people around me and it only got worse as I aged. I tried and tried to build a network of people around me to no avail. I remember one time I was attending a potluck and I had managed to wear some reasonable clothes and brought a dish to share. (I was so proud of myself!) So I'm in this crowded living room, filled with prospective friends, and I went to sit on the couch with a plate of food. As I was sitting down I glanced down at the couch and saw it was covered with hundreds of naked, squirming, silent babies. I made a horrible sound and leapt up, my food flying. It was humiliating beyond belief but fairly typical of my stabs at making friendships. I did manage to have a child in an attempt to build a family around me.

As life went on, my condition became worse and worse. I clearly looked like someone to avoid at all costs. I had dreams about what to wear, and if I didn't have a dream, I would wear the same outlandish outfits over and over, sometimes for weeks at a time. So I had hygiene issues. I would either shuffle or stride up and down the street, depending on my mood, muttering to myself and occasionally verbally attacking passers-by. My son, who turned out to be a person with a psychiatric disorder himself, was living in mental hospitals and residential treatment centers. I could not keep him safe and lost partial custody of him to social services. My situation was pretty bleak.

Finally I had just had enough. I made a plan to kill both myself and my son. Fortunately I told someone of my plan and I was whisked away to a community mental health hospital. As I was on Medicaid, I entered into the Colorado community mental health system and immediately started receiving excellent care. I was determined to turn my life around. Working with my doctors and therapists, I started taking care of myself, sleeping appropriately and eating decent food. It took a long time, but we found a cocktail of psychotropic medications that worked for me, alleviating my symptoms with very few side effects. I regained full custody of my son and started working. Today, I am a Vice-President at Mental Health America of Colorado!

As happy as I am today, I am heartbroken that 45 years of my life were lost. The jobs I managed to hold down had no mental health insurance and certainly no substance abuse care available. I had to go on welfare to get the care I needed. Things that people take for granted- like getting married, holding down a real job, driving a car, volunteering in the community- were beyond me most of my life. I was nothing but a drain on society. Today I am a tax-paying citizen with private insurance! I am no longer to be ashamed to be the person I am. Thank you.