



A journey to recovering from mental illness

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Author's Note

If you want to have an awkward conversation with someone, try telling them you suffer from psychosis, depression and PTSD. I've even had health professionals look at me blankly when I've said that. People don't really know a lot about psychosis in particular and it seems to be one of those shameful topics that nobody really wants to deal with. For that reason I think it's important to start a conversation about it. Whether you suffer from these afflictions, care for someone who experiences them or you're just curious to know more about them, this book is for you. The most important message in these pages is that you can recover from these illnesses. It's possible. I know because I've done it. I focussed most of my attention on getting well rather than trying to understand the scientific reasons behind why it happened in the first place and that is what I want to talk about in this book. I looked around me to try and find people who had recovered from psychosis and had a hard time finding them. I eventually looked toward a group of sufferers who started up a self-help 12-step program called GROW. Not having access to that group in the town I lived in I never-the-less sought out what I could find on the internet. Piecing it together this way I set out on my journey.

Chapter 1

I was mostly on a high. I was earning six figures, even though I had to work 72 hours a week to get it and I was in the process of publishing a series of children's books. I was pushing myself and I was very worried about my son's wellbeing at the time but I knew I could handle it. For the most part, my life was coming together after many years of struggle.

Then it occurred to me – it was a trap.

I lived and worked on an island in a construction camp and I suddenly realised that I was in mortal danger. Someone was planning to kill me. Why hadn't I seen the signs before?

Panic gripped me as I saw it all clearly for the first time. I ran. I literally fled into the surrounding bushland and threw away my phone because I was convinced "they" were tracking me with it. There I hid for several hours getting more and more frantic about the situation I was in. Finally I realised I needed to get help and I went in search of my boss only to discover there was a search party out looking for me. When I found my boss he took one look at me and gently led me to the medical centre. There I was transported to hospital where I was diagnosed with having a stress induced psychotic break and I was sent home to my family who were shocked and dismayed to learn that they had a mental patient to look after. At first I couldn't accept that as being true. It took me several days of experiencing delusions and being totally divorced from reality for the medication and diagnosis to sink in. Then when it did, I was mortified.

It goes to show how out of touch I was with myself that this was the first time I'd ever acknowledged that there was something wrong with me. In hindsight I'd suffered from depression and PTSD for years. But I was so good at keeping up the façade of being okay and soldiering on through life like a true battler that I never allowed

myself to recognise my own illness. As a result, it compounded and got worse until I had a complete psychotic break.

When people refer to these events in our lives as a spiritual awakening they are right. This was the moment when I finally woke up to my predicament. I was mentally ill and it was high time I did something about it.

Fortunately for me, while my family floundered for a way to understand what was wrong with me I had people around me who did understand. Most important was my friend who was part of the mental health recovery program – GROW. Between her and my doctor I began my long painful road to recovery.

I wrote down GROW's 12-step program and I began relating them into my life. I also read a lot of books and watched podcasts and Youtube videos. I will recommend these as we go along. The first recommendation is to go onto the GROW's Facebook page, sign up and ask for a copy of their Blue Book.

<https://www.facebook.com/growau>

Chapter 2

STEP 1: We admitted we had lost our way and needed direction.

(GROW 12-Step program)

I like to think of this stage of my journey as my phoenix moment. It was the point in my life when my whole being felt like it had turned to ash. The proof was undeniable although I wanted to avoid it – I was mentally ill and my thoughts could no longer be trusted.

That loss of faith I experienced in myself was devastating. Surrendering to it was hard but I had no choice. It was the only course open to me.

My GROW friend tried to tell me I'd made an important breakthrough and I could now begin my journey to bigger and better things but at the time I struggled to see it. For a time I wandered aimlessly. I needed direction in my life.

Fortunately, my GROW friend, my mother and my sister gently guided me along until I was ready to think about where I needed to go next. They each brought different lessons to my table and I know I needed them all to navigate through the experience.

All of my adult life I have used the Serenity Prayer to guide me:

God grant me the Serenity

To accept the things I cannot change,

The Courage to change the things I can,

And the Wisdom to know the difference.

My Mum taught me acceptance. I had to accept that I was ill and she reinforced that for me.

My sister taught me courage. I had to find it within myself to get better.

My GROW friend taught me the wisdom of knowing not to expect that to happen overnight. It would take a long time and that I owed it to myself to be gentle on myself through the process.

A podcast I found particularly helpful to this stage of my journey was Brene Brown's *The Power of Vulnerability*.

https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability

Chapter 3

STEP 2: We took our courage in our hands and asked for help.

(GROW 12-Step program)

I was always a bit of a conspiracy theorist when it came to big pharmaceutical companies medicating the population so I had my doubts about following the advice of my doctor. My psychiatrist prescribed me anti-psychotic medication and I hated taking it. It felt like it was turning me into a zombie and I also very quickly put on weight. So I stopped taking it. Sure enough, the psychosis returned.

I had to concede that my highly trained psychiatrist probably knew more about my illness than I did so to my own dismay, I had to accept my future as a fat zombie. I spiralled into a deep depression that I also needed drugs for which also gave me bad side-effects.

So it became my aim in life to get better. My doctor told me if I could last two years without having another relapse he'd consider taking me off medication. So that's where I aimed. Four years later I've had no relapse but I'm still on the medication. But now I'm on the lowest dosage you can take, I've adjusted to it and I've accepted that maybe it's what has helped me to get better as much as the other work I've done.

My belief was that I needed to throw everything I could at the problem and I needed help so I reached out to the people I trusted most and asked them for it. This was a big deal for me. I'm the eldest of four girls and a former police officer. I was not raised or trained to show vulnerability. To me asking for help was an admission of weakness and in my world, that was not an acceptable thing to be. Asking for help was hard but an amazing thing happened when I did. I got it.

My sister organised a whole week of 'healing' activities for me including everything from tuning my spiritual vibrations to colonics. I even found myself dancing naked around a fire with a group of strange women. She tried everything.

My GROW friend spent hours on end talking me through everything and my daughters stepped up and took control of anything in my life that could cause me stress from my money to my book publishing.

I can't really pinpoint what worked for me and what didn't because I think it was the whole experience combined that did it.

Slowly but surely, inch by tiny inch, I got better. Asking for help was the best thing I ever did and when I look back to how my life was before my breakdown, I wish I had've learned how to ask for help sooner.

I'm going to recommend you read Johann Hari's *Lost Connections – Uncovering the Real Causes of Depression – and the Unexpected Solutions*. But for the record, I believe medication is a vital part of getting well. In this book Johann makes a big case against them but I glossed over that part and went straight to the chapters about the nine causes of depression and the nine ways to recover from it.

https://www.audible.com.au/pd/Lost-Connections-Audiobook/B078HH4D4H?qid=1540099337&sr=sr_1_2&ref=a_search_c3_lProduct_1_2&pf_rd_p=771c6463-05d7-4981-9b47-920dc34a70f1&pf_rd_r=Y1SX84M4HADN1NJ4V1CW&

Chapter 4

STEP 3: We surrendered to the mystery of life and love – God.

(GROW 12-Step Program)

This was a really significant step for me. I had a really bleak view of my own future and I think that had a lot to do with why I felt so depressed. For starters, I believed I would never be able to recover from psychosis. I was fortunate enough to have a job but my dream of being a writer went up in smoke. One day I really thought about my future and I reasoned out a few key ideas.

The first was that I wasn't psychic. Never in my life had I been able to predict my future so why I thought I could start doing it then I don't know. Life has thrown up surprises for me before – some good and some bad – and I never saw them coming. The truth is I don't know what the future holds for me and that is in fact a good thing. So why did I struggle with it so much? Because it can also be scary to think what the possibilities are. It all boils down to whether or not you have faith. If you believe in a higher power whether it be God, the universe or whatever you perceive it to be – you have to realise that the future holds an endless source of possibilities. And sometimes what we believe is a bad experience, can prove to be a blessing in disguise.

Having a psychotic break was a terrible experience for me yet a lot of good things came out of it. My family rallied around me and reminded me that I was loved. I felt how powerful our brains are even when they're malfunctioning and gained a whole new respect for that. I learned true humility when I had to accept the fact that I was mentally ill and vulnerable. And I learned that I'm much stronger than I thought I was.

Maybe God had a plan for me after all.

When that penny finally dropped for me I felt like a new person and a huge cloud seemed to lift.

And when it comes to believing that there is a God my logic is this – if I go through life believing there is a God and I get to the end of it only to discover there is nothing – I've lost nothing because I won't exist anymore. But if I go through life not believing there is a God and I get to the end only to discover there actually is – I've lost everything. What have I got to lose?

I recommend you read Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist*.

<https://www.ebooks.com/1980954/the-alchemist/coelho-paulo/>

Chapter 5

STEP 4: We acknowledge our gifts and our strengths

(GROW 12-Step Program)

I've always seen myself as a calm and creative soul. My strengths are that I remain calm in a crisis and that I have a great imagination. It seemed to me that my psychotic break was taking my strengths and making a complete joke out of them.

I wasn't calm when I thought someone was trying to kill me, I panicked and fled. And my "creative imagination" it seemed was nothing more than delusion. It frightened me that I had crossed the line into not knowing what was real and what was 'imagination'.

My mental illness turned my beliefs about myself on their heads and all that was left was for me to despair over the fact that I had no real gifts and strengths – I was broken.

I've always loved to write and draw and be creative but that all came to an abrupt halt. I no longer trusted myself and my broken creativity.

Eventually I sat down and really thought through this belief. Yes I fled, and then I pulled myself together and calmly walked into the fray to seek help. My doctor made me realise that I actually showed real tenacity and courage by doing that. It's perfectly okay to panic when you're experiencing a psychotic break and the fact that I pulled it together at all was only because of my ability to stay calm in a crisis.

As for my creativity, it never left me or let me down either, I just lost faith in it for a while. I decided to climb back on that horse the day I picked up a pen and decided to write this book.

Relearning to love myself and acknowledge my strengths and gifts was a hard step for me but my children really helped me there, particularly my youngest daughter. She worked really hard at helping me to restore my self-esteem.

For anyone who cares for a loved one with mental illness this step is where you can really help them. Often we can see the strengths and gifts of the people around us more clearly than we can see them in ourselves and being told by others what our strengths and gifts are can help us to wake back up to them.

Read Teal Swan's *Shadows before Dawn – Finding the Light of Self-Love Through your Darkest Times*.

<https://www.booktopia.com.au/shadows-before-dawn-teal-swan/prod9781781804698.html>

Chapter 6

STEP 5: We also tackled our weaknesses and failures.

(GROW 12-Step Program)

The big question I asked myself after my breakdown was “how did I get here? What did I do that caused me to have a complete psychotic break?”

My Mum insisted it was genetic and according to a lot of research done on this subject, many doctors agree with that conclusion but that explanation wasn't enough for me. I knew my actions were as much to blame as anything else. I arrived at a few insights about myself and some of the beliefs I had.

Firstly, I bottled things up. I've always had a belief that I couldn't burden people with my problems, so I kept them to myself. I was also a police officer and a single mum so I used to go home to my children and not tell them about my day. I just kept everything inside me. It festered like poison and I became depressed but I soldiered on, never letting anyone know I was in trouble because that was what was expected of me as a mother and a police officer. It was for me to solve everyone else's problems. I had to be the strong one. I couldn't show weakness.

The great thing about discovering where you went wrong is that once you do bring it to light, you can do something about it. Now I talk and when I don't feel like I can talk, I write. I don't go around thinking I have to always be the strong one now. I'm human like everybody else and I struggle sometimes too, so now when I'm struggling – I say so. I tell anyone who will listen to me.

Then there's my social anxiety. I'm not good in groups and crowds. I'm more of a one-on-one person. In trying to get well I did join some groups but I struggled with sharing in those situations. It is a

weakness I have and I've decided to tackle it in two ways. First is to keep showing up and keep trying. This is something I'm determined to work on and practise makes perfect.

Second, is to do most of my self-improvement work one-on-one. By seeking out a coach, counsellor or mentor.

I've also decided to offer my services as a mentor for anyone who also finds group work difficult. Sometimes it's just better to accept that we are not perfect and to work with our weaknesses.

I recommend you read Thich Nhat Hanh's *Fear – Essential Wisdom for Getting Through the Storm*.

<https://www.booktopia.com.au/fear-thich-nhat-hanh/prod9781846043185.html>

Chapter 7

STEP 6: We endured until cured.

(GROW 12-Step Program)

“This too shall pass” was my mantra for four years while I was healing. Nothing lasts forever.

If you can see a light at the end of the tunnel then focus on it for all you’re worth because not everyone can. I didn’t for a long time and getting out of bed each day was a struggle.

I found focussing on the simple things in life helped.

For me one of the side effects of the medication I was on was that my mind felt foggy and I had difficulty concentrating, so I practised focussing on good things that were small. The way I felt revived while I was having a shower. The way being outdoors in the fresh air put a smile on my face. The smell of freshly brewed coffee and that lovely feeling of warmth I get when I first climb into bed at night. For a long time that was all I could manage but a miraculous thing happened – bit by bit I began to heal and feel better.

Prior to my breakdown I was always a big thinker. I’d think about the problems of the world and consider myself to be an armchair philosopher so it was very frustrating for me to lose that ability but I think I needed that. It taught me to declutter my mind and focus on the little things. It’s true what they say – when you take care of the little things, the big things take care of themselves.

The thing about the side effects of medication is that if you can endure them long enough for the medication to do its work, you will eventually get better. Since I believe that medication is not the only way to heal – the same can be said for any other methods you are using to get well.

A friend of mine was suffering from depression and the simple tasks she set herself helped her recover as well. Her first task was to force herself to get out of bed each morning at a set time and get dressed. The longer she did it, the easier it became until eventually it became natural for her to do once again. Then she would set herself another goal and work towards that.

Healing can be a slow process so don't become discouraged if it is not happening fast enough for you. It takes as long as it takes, the important thing is to persist and get actively involved in your own healing journey. Do up a plan of what you want to achieve and inch your way toward your goals one step at a time.

When you start to get disheartened and want to give up, watch the Youtube video I'm now going to recommend by Nick Vujicic – *Overcoming Hopelessness*.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NZBIGCdhNwY>

Chapter 8

STEP 7: We took care and control of our bodies.

(GROW 12-Step Program)

I view the daily task of taking care of myself as an act of self-love and it's amazing how well my mental wellbeing has responded to that. Don't get me wrong, I'm a far cry from being a health guru. For starters I hate exercise if it involves spending hours in a gym or running. I'm more of a make myself walk a few extra blocks to get to the shops sort of person. But I've been down the rabbit hole of mental illness where I have totally neglected myself and I'm happy with the progress I have made in this department.

There is definitely a link between our mental health and our physical health and there is a tonne of research on the subject. It stands to reason that if you are struggling in one of those areas, you will also see the effects in the other. With that knowledge, it also stands to reason that if you heal one of those areas, you will also help to heal the other.

For me that has involved changing my diet and changing my job so I don't have to do nightshifts and I get a good night sleep each night. I also enjoy my nightly showers and I have looked for a way to get more exercise into my life. Just those small actions have made a remarkable difference to my state of mind.

I know of people suffering from PTSD and depression who have thrown themselves right into the health and fitness world and who swear by it as a 'must do' to recover from mental illness. Everyone has their own approach and while mine is more gentle and subtle, it suits me.

Like I've said, each time I sit down to a healthy meal is another act of self-love. Each time I have a shower or crawl into bed for a good

night's sleep – it's an act of self-love. Lots of people will tell you when you're suffering from a mental illness that you need to love yourself. For someone who is severely depressed or psychotic that can seem about as achievable as flying to the moon on a broomstick. How do you love yourself when you're feeling so wretched? You start with some acts of tenderness and kindness. Gentle nurturing of the body equates to gentle nurturing of the mind.

I think that's another reason why my sister's week of healing activities was so effective. She juice-cleansed me, got me acupuncture, spiritual healing and numerous other acts that involved kind, gentle people taking care of me. It was just what the doctor ordered.

Don't stop at only taking care of yourself physically, let other people in to take care of you too. Go for that massage, try reflexology, or Tai Chi or whatever else takes your fancy. Anything that is helping you physically will be helping you mentally as well.

I recommend watching Michelle Caterson's podcast *Let's Talk About*.

Chapter 9

STEP 8: We learned to think by reason rather than by feelings and imagination.

(GROW 12-Step Program)

If there's one thing psychosis has taught me it's that the brain is a powerful bit of kit. You can convince yourself of anything – be it good or bad. The secret to successfully training your thoughts to be good comes down to your own internal dialogue or self-talk. Your self-talk has to be reasonable and in touch with reality but the process of getting to that place is not an easy one. Someone who is in the grip of a psychotic episode can't do it and that's why it's important for them to have calm and reasonable people around them until their medications start doing their thing. That is why you endure the side effects and do what the doctors tell you. It's to get to the point in your life where you can take control of your thoughts.

Then it's about reprogramming your inner dialogue to be kind and loving to yourself but grounded in reality and reason.

I don't think it's possible to achieve this step on your own. Life coaches, mentors and support groups are really important to this stage of your growth. The reason being that they can determine what your inner dialogue is and guide you bit by bit to make changes to it until it's really resonating with your truest and best self.

A good mentor or coach will help you to really examine your deepest thoughts and beliefs and will help you to apply reason and compassion to them until they transcend into something wiser and better for you. That's the exciting part of this process, the wisdom you can gain from it will change your life for the better.

This process is popular with everyone these days, not just people suffering from mental illnesses. Sports professionals seek coaching

to examine the blockages to their performance and businessmen are coached to become more successful and wealthier. It's a phenomenon in the world that has really taken off in all walks of life and that's because it has true value.

A world renowned life coach and motivational speaker is Tony Robbins and I recommend you watch his Youtube video called *How to Reprogram Your Brain*.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tw_otBB9HEs

Chapter 10

STEP 9: We developed will power to do the right thing in spite of our feelings.

(GROW 12-Step Program)

We are all responsible for our actions – period.

Having a mental illness does not give you a free pass despite what some people may think.

I'm lucky I was never an aggressive or nasty psychosis sufferer but I'm well aware from my policing days that some people are. The truth for them is this – they need to heal as much as the next person but their actions threaten to drive away the very people they need in order to do that.

This is why I see the need for good mental health facilities. The first priority has to be preventing harm to others and this is as much for the ill person's benefit as anyone else's. Eventually they will have to reconcile with what they've done and healing will be that much harder for them if they have to face up to the fact that they hurt their loved ones or some innocent bystander.

Let's not stop at psychosis sufferers. What about people suffering from depression who can't get out of bed to take care of their children? I'm lucky that my children were fully grown before I became debilitated but I was still very aware of the fact that they were taking care of me when I should have been taking care of them.

Mental illness makes you selfish. When you're in pain it's almost impossible to see the pain of those around you because you become so consumed by it. That's why you owe it, not only to yourself, but everyone around you to get better. Then you can go back to being a

compassionate human being who can be relied on by others to be there for them when they need it.

Why did the GROW founders say they developed the 'will power' to do the right thing? Why does this not just happen naturally of its own accord?

It takes a reordering of values within your own mind to bring it about. Mentally ill people who have been to the edge often develop a survivor mentality. It's law of the jungle stuff and usually means looking out for number one. While it serves its purpose to get you through your crisis period you have to be careful not to get stuck in that mentality. It requires conscious effort to rise above that and soar like a phoenix once again.

I recommend the Dalai Lama's *Ancient Wisdom; Modern World* for this step.

<https://www.booktopia.com.au/ancient-wisdom-modern-world-the-dalai-lama/prod9780349112541.html>

Chapter 11

STEP 10: We took our responsible and caring place in society.

(GROW 12-Step Program)

Once you've faced your demons, made amends for the people you've hurt and can stand proudly in your own skin with hope for the future – what then? Where do you go and what do you do?

The life you knew before has often been fatally interrupted by your illness and you have to start again to rebuild a new and more wholesome existence.

We know from reading this book that we have to reconnect with society and take up our 'reasonable and caring' place within it. We know we have to have goals and meaningful work.

I decided to pick up a pen and start writing again along with staying actively involved with GROW. I wanted to put myself out there to help others but everyone will have their own ideas of what's right for them. The beauty of this stage is that the sky is the limit. You've risen from the ashes and are flying onward and upward.

Does that mean you can stop working on yourself and just go into auto-pilot? Hell no. Not unless you want to spiral out of control again. Mental wellness is a life-long journey just as physical wellness is. You need to continue following your higher purpose, continue listening to your heart and soul and always stay vigilant to your own inner dialogue. Then you can be a productive member of society learning how to love and be loved.

I thought I was a compassionate person prior to my breakdown but I know now I really wasn't. I didn't understand mental illness and I shared a lot of the misconceptions people have about it.

I'm convinced that this experience was meant to teach me about acceptance and humility and to make me a more understanding and compassionate person, and it has definitely done that.

I've decided to mark this experience up as a learning curve and go on armed with my new and improved kit of tolerance, humility and wisdom.

I recommend you watch the I-Open Community Youtube video called *Growing Communities of Compassion*.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bqLDQAUvpxs>

Chapter 12

STEP 11: We grew daily closer to maturity.

(GROW 12-Step Program)

I believe we all have a higher self. It is the best version of us that we're all striving to be whether you're mentally ill or not. And life goes on. If you manage to recover from mental illness does that mean your suffering will forever be over? I'm afraid not. Life brings suffering and suffering brings growth. It is how we inch closer to our higher selves.

The lessons won't stop and some of them will be hard but the path to maturity teaches us to know and expect that. It also teaches us that we have all the resources we need to be able to deal with whatever comes our way.

We all have an inner child and that is where a lot of our insecurities and fears come from but we all have an inner grown-up as well and facing the big bad world alone requires the grown-up to take charge of the child and lead them gently by the hand until they feel reassured.

Why do the GROW founders say they grew daily closer instead of actually achieving maturity? Could it be that we never really get there? Is it some elusive carrot on a stick? It acknowledges the fact that for as long as we live and breathe we will continue to learn and grow. The journey never ends. Accepting that fact as a part of life is something I struggled with for a while. What's the point? I thought. What's the reason behind this never-ending struggle? That is why I sat down and really examined my own beliefs about the purpose of life.

I'm very spiritual so the logic that we all go on after our time on this Earth is over makes sense to me. I see this world as a classroom for

the soul and we get graded for our efforts at the end of it. That belief helps me to grow ever closer towards maturity.

I recommend you watch Anthony Cheam's *You 2.0 – What it REALLY Takes to Be the Best Version of Yourself*.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M45HDbaW1DI>

Chapter 13

STEP 12: We carried GROW's message to others in need.

(GROW 12-Step Program)

Why have I focussed on GROW's 12 steps for this book and not one of the many books and videos I have encouraged you to read and watch? They all resonated with me in their own ways and I gained something valuable from all of them so why the 12 steps in particular?

GROW appealed to me for three reasons.

First, it broke down the problem into manageable bites that I could focus on one at a time.

Second, it was written by a collective of people who suffered mental illness and had proven through their own experiences what works.

Third, it provides a safe space where you connect to other people experiencing mental illness and who are committed to getting well.

I consider myself very fortunate that my friend introduced me to GROW before I even had my breakdown because otherwise I probably never would have heard about it.

I live in a rural area in Australia and like many others in my position, I don't have access to great mental health services. The few services that are available are overworked and stretched out to try and accommodate a growing problem. Like many others in a rural setting I was diagnosed and sent home for my family to deal with, who had no knowledge whatsoever of what to do with me. It was a scary experience for us all and while I love how they did their best to support me – they themselves needed support to be able to deal with the situation.

What I want to do now is reach out to as many people as I can who may be in that lost and unsupported state and offer them help.

In this day and age in a vast spread out country like Australia it seems the best way for me to do that is to use the internet. I've now joined an e-GROW group which relies on the web to connect those of us in the regions and I intend to create blogs, Youtube videos and anything else I can learn with my minimal IT skills to get the word out there and offer my services as a mentor to anyone wanting help with any stage of their journey.

To visit my website for more information please follow the below link:

www.angiecaterson.com

I also recommend you read Dr Wayne W Dyer's book *Wishes Fulfilled: Mastering the art of manifesting*.

<https://www.booktopia.com.au/wishes-fulfilled-dr-wayne-dyer/prod9781401937287.html>