

## ***"I'm Back, Baby!"***

*by Laura Anne Middlestead*

I was 41 when I experienced my first mental illness—a wicked battle with Generalized Anxiety Disorder. I had led a pretty charmed life until my thirties, but then a series of hardships—my mother's accidental death, infertility, layoffs, and finally a disastrous cross-country move—tipped me over into relentless anxiety. My family and I ended up turning around and moving back across the country to the East Coast because of my mental state, which I attributed to our new location. Of course, by then I needed medical treatment, but I didn't understand that at the time. I waited until I had gotten a job and my insurance had kicked in before seeing a doctor. Once I did, a standard dose of a common antidepressant turned me around in a month—but the damage was done, both to our family's finances and to my marriage.

Although I remained healthy, my husband ended up moving out a year-and-a-half later. I stayed on my medicine and got through what initially seemed like the end of the world. I did so well, in fact, that a little over a year later, I decided I didn't need an anti-depressant anymore and stopped taking it. Four months afterwards, my divorce was finalized, I had to put my dog to sleep, and my doctor ordered an MRI to look for brain tumors—all in the same week! In hindsight, it appears obvious what would happen, but I didn't see it coming at the time. In a matter of days, anxiety had me in its unbearable grip once again.

Treatment was not so straightforward this time. Although I restarted my medication, I felt worse

initially and made the irrational decision to stop taking it. My doctor then ordered a different medication, which was disastrous for my digestive system. I began to lose weight rapidly. At this point, I was referred to a psychiatrist for the first time. I had to drive out of town to find one who was accepting new patients. A period of constant flux followed—additions, subtractions, and dose changes in my meds, while I got sicker and sicker and saw my hope for recovery dwindle to nothing.

I had two suicide attempts in two weeks: an overdose and a violent attempt to kill myself. I ended up in a large hospital in a nearby city for more than seven weeks. I spent three weeks in intensive care and three weeks in the psychiatric ward. When I was released by a judge in January of 2008, I stood 5' 7" and weighed 93 pounds. I had had two major surgeries and was covered with scars. My short-term memory was impaired. I was unable to work, drive, care for my son, or live on my own.

I had a million obstacles to overcome at this point, but I had one key advantage: I was no longer anxious. My old standby medicine, at the old standby dose, had kicked in sometime while I was in the midst of my feverish morphine dreams.

I have to credit my recovery to medication, because without it, I never could have been well enough to benefit from recovery's other key components: a great counselor,

a wonderful family, the responsibilities of my job, my son, running my household, and my own determination to get my life back and "make it up" to everyone. I wrote encouragement to myself in my journal: lists of goals, things to do to make myself feel better, helpful mantras, and a list of everyone who supported me. As I began to gain the weight back, I took many well-documented baby steps back toward my normal life. Privately, I celebrated each one: buying jeans that fit, getting my teeth cleaned, and baking a cake.

In June of that year, four months after my release, I bought my first house since my divorce. After that, my recovery really took off. The day of the closing, I finally wrote the words I'd been waiting to write in my journal: "I'm BACK, baby!"

