

Addiction by Prescription

Chapter 10

Systemic Denial

Now my life took on a new dimension. I had no job, but found myself busier than ever before. I needed to reconnect with my daughters, and above that, I needed to find out all I could about the drugs I had been taking all these years. I expected the medical community to be especially helpful, but was shocked when there was no help or information forthcoming from that sector. Every doctor I contacted for help, minimized my symptoms, and flatly denied knowing anything about the effects of benzodiazepine addiction, or for that matter, withdrawals.

I had my medical records sent to a female doctor, thinking she would understand and be more sympathetic to my plight. Along with my records came all the reports of "bipolar", "psychiatric disorder", and "psychotic rages". They saw me as on a crusade against tranquilizers and sleeping pills, and the doctors that prescribed them.

They couldn't have been more wrong, I was just pleading for help, and there was no one that would stand by me and believe that I needed it. Even the neurologist I was referred to for the numbness in my fingers (a common withdrawal symptom) was determined to bring up my past and attempted to once more prescribe Lithium. To this day, when I think about how easily this addiction grew, I am very concerned. If it happened to me, it can happen to anyone—and it does. This is enormously troubling to me. Refusing to take drugs prescribed by a psychiatrist, it seems, is 'proof' that you are not really ill but only misguided—or faking. It's a truly frightening and unconscionable practice that works to perpetuate the overprescribing of these drugs to vulnerable and uninformed patients.

Despite all this, I knew I had to keep trying to find help. My insomnia was one of the hardest things to live with. I read every book I could that would shed light on my condition. I needed to find out how the brain recovers after such long-term interference. I went to a sleep disorder clinic and was summarily dismissed and ignored. "Past psychiatric history is positive," wrote one doctor. "She has received a number of medications . . . for the most part she was *managed* with benzodiazepines."

For months I had recurring panic attacks, loss of appetite, oversensitivity, especially in my eyes. I had relentless pressure bands around my head and some days my eyes wouldn't focus properly. My coordination was still badly off and I would drop things unexpectedly. At times I would break out in a sweat for no apparent reason. My skin felt like it had gone from sandpaper to silk.

Yet I clung to the hope that things would get better, and I thanked God every day that there were no more unintentional pill overdoses or suicidal thoughts in my life. In fact, I felt glad to be alive, to be given a second chance, even though I still lived with a flattened emotional response to most aspects of my life.

I have developed a great deal of compassion for others faced with this sort of indignity; I know that many of them are never able to fight their way to the other side of it, and often return to pills. I was very fortunate in that I started with a high level of motivation. Yet even for me it has been a grueling battle, which continues to this day.