

Can I Still Be Somebody?

Zenaida Garcia

I came from Puerto Rico with my three kids in 1996. I was running away from a ten-year marriage filled with domestic violence and abuse. I did not speak proper English, so I signed up for an English class at Genesis Center in Providence, Rhode Island. For about two years, I studied English and computer skills, and I also entered a teacher assistant program and volunteered at Alfred Lima Elementary School.

Retail Work Was Stressful

I applied to the School Department to work as a teacher's assistant, but I did not get the job. I wanted to keep studying English, but the state wanted me to work. So I got a job in retail. I was super scared and stressed out. I didn't feel ready for that kind of job. My hair started falling out. But I stayed six and a half years.

My English improved, but not enough to please the customers who insulted me for not understanding them. People would say, "If you don't speak English, go back to your country!" or "What are you doing working here, if you don't understand English?" I would just smile and say, "Have

a nice day!" I met other employees who were also struggling with the language and cruel situations with people. We supported each other, trying to live the American Dream. Employees can get fired, but customers—you can't fire customers.

Many times I would drive home crying after work. But I never gave up! Some customers would lift me up by saying things like, "You are a good cashier," or "You are doing a good job." They told me not to listen to those mean customers.

Cancer, Debt, Depression

In April 2008, my mom, who was living with us, got cancer. She had less than a year to live. I had three kids and no family to help me take care of my mom. My oldest daughter had to help me with my other two kids. One January morning, in a snow storm, my mom passed away. I had never seen it snow like that. It was beautiful. We traveled to Puerto Rico to bury her.

Then my two sisters died of cancer eleven months apart. I took a genetic test, which revealed that I had a good chance of getting cancer too. I decided to have a hysterectomy. I went into severe

ZENAIDA'S STORY IN PICTURES AND CAPTIONS...



I ran away from a ten-year marriage filled with domestic violence and abuse.



I got a job in retail. I was very scared and stressed out. My hair started falling out.



My mother and sisters died of cancer. I was depressed and in debt.

depression. With the loss of my job, the death of my mother and my sisters, being in debt, and having health issues, I found myself in an abyss.

Starting Again

I was referred to The Providence Center, and I began to find myself again. Their dedication and compassion helped me get through my mental health issues. Groups like In Shape, Women's Group, and Mental Wellness helped me come back to life. I was inspired to go back to school.

I chose Genesis Center again, because it was familiar and I felt welcomed. Now I'm in a College and Career Readiness class for ESOL learners. Mr. Buchalter, my teacher, helped me find my gift. He says I'm a natural writer.

I asked, "Do you think at my age I can still be somebody, after four years of unemployment, severe depression, anxiety, insomnia, co-dependency, fibromyalgia, and being a victim of domestic violence and sexual assault?" I wondered how a person like me, with all these problems, could go to college. I wanted to bring my self-esteem back. That's what I missed the most.

I told him, "You opened my eyes and found something good in me that I didn't know about. You made me think about what I really want. One day, I'm going to write about my life—about all my struggles and my path to success."

Still Struggling

Meanwhile, I am in a program called Medical Assistant Plus. In this program, I am learning office skills, clinical techniques, and software specific to the medical field. The program is designed for people who speak English as a second language. But I am frustrated. I am struggling. This is not what I really want to do with my life. I feel like I am doing it just because it is available. My mind is rushing. It is here; it is there. Right now, I have to choose a path going forward, and I don't know what to choose.

AFTER YOU READ: Look at the Mental Health Career Pathway on p. 13. What experience does Zenaida have that might make her an excellent Community Health Worker? What advice do you have for Zenaida as she decides her path?

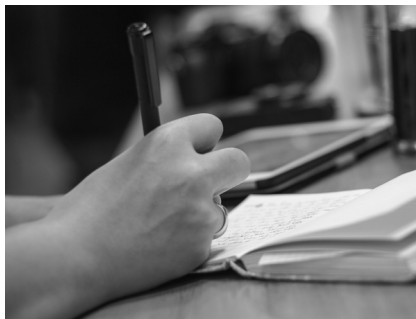
From San Juan, Puerto Rico, Zenaida Garcia studies at Genesis Center in Providence, Rhode Island, where she lives. Through writing short stories about love, life struggles, and her path to success, she wants to help women survivors of domestic violence and sexual abuse. She plans to go to college to become a peer specialist.



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I went to the Genesis Center. I am doing better. I am studying to be a Medical Assistant.



But I want to be a writer and tell my story. I want to share my struggles and my success.



Right now, I have to choose a path going forward, and I don't know what to choose.

My Couch, My Walls, My Hair

What to Do (and Not to Do!) for your Mental Health During a Pandemic

Zenaida Garcia

My Work and My Wacky Moments

Part of my job is to be well and to help others find wellness. But sometimes we all lose the sunlit path. We find ourselves wandering into darkness. In this essay, I'm going to take you on my journey into the darkness of depression and show you how I found my way back to the path.

Like many Americans, before the Covid-19 pandemic struck, I was more or less fine. Then, things changed. Because of Covid-19, the city bus became a scary place; a stranger coughing nearby induced anxiety. At work, I was no longer able to see my clients except through Zoom. I found myself isolated. I hit a low.

I work as a Peer Recovery Specialist for a mental health center. As part of my job, I listen to people and support them in their recovery. I let them know that they're not alone. I help them see there is a better life out there. Helping them helps me, too. It gives my life purpose.

But sometimes my clients aren't ready to share their innermost secrets with me until I share some of my own. I know how embarrassing it can be to do things that we're not proud of. Strange times, such as the one we're in right now, bring out strange feelings. Here are some of my wackiest pandemic moments. I share them with you here so you can see you are not alone. You don't have to throw away your furniture, as I did; you don't have to repaint your entire apartment, as I did; you don't have to cut off all your hair, as I did. You can learn from my failed attempts to feel better, as well as from my successes.



Furniture / Paint / Hair

I live in a small apartment. When I moved in, my son bought me a beautiful, comfortable, beige couch. I loved it. So many beautiful memories happened on that couch. My grandson's face used to light up when he jumped on it—he thought he was Superman! I used to catch him and tickle him and hug him. I taught him how to read on that couch. And I told him bedtime stories on that couch until he fell asleep, getting drool on my beautiful upholstery!

But the pandemic was making me stir-crazy! On a whim, I decided to throw away my couch. When the quarantine took effect, I was stuck inside with that raggedy thing for what seemed like decades. Suddenly, its suede felt irritating. I noticed stains that I'd not seen before. I swear it smelled like my grandson's drool. And it took up so much space! I know now, I was suffering from what I would call "pandemic-induced claustrophobia." I. Needed. It. Out. So I posted on Facebook Marketplace "Free Couch!"—and it didn't take long for someone to claim it. The couch was gone, but you know what wasn't gone? My anxiety. I still felt that the walls were closing in on me.

Speaking of the walls, the color started irritating me. I convinced myself that the bone white hue was responsible for my crashing serotonin levels. So I went to Ace Hardware and picked up a couple gallons of bright white paint. And, without the landlord's consent, I did my best to cover up that bone-chilling color. But what it didn't cover up was my depression. Even as the

paint fumes filled my nostrils, I still felt irritated, anxious, and depressed. I almost wanted to start pulling my hair out.

But instead of pulling out my hair, I Face-timed my daughter, and I told her, “Kenia, I’m going to cut my hair, and I want you to ‘be with me’ on this journey.” She said, “Mommy, are you sure

It turns out you can’t throw away, cover up, or chop off the bad feelings you are having.

you want to do this?” Nothing could stop me. I sat on the bathroom floor and put the phone on top of the toilet seat, so that my daughter was on my level. With the aid of two mirrors, I buzzed

and chopped away, until all my curls were on the bathroom floor. When it was over, I looked into the mirror. I did not like what I saw.

After my daughter hung up, I sat on the cold tiles, crying. Nothing I tried had worked. It turns out you can’t throw away, cover up, or chop off the bad feelings you are having. None of these strategies helped me. What I needed was a professional. I called Sam, my psychiatrist.

Seeking Help

I told Sam everything. He helped me realize that the isolation was affecting my physical and mental health. I was losing sleep, gaining weight, and watching the news incessantly. Sam helped me get back on the path. He reassured me that it was normal to feel the way I was feeling, considering the horrors of the pandemic.

Sam suggested that I go outside and have contact with nature. He told me, “Zenaida, you need to get some sunlight!” He reminded me to stay six feet away from others and to wear a mask. His support helped me realize that it was okay to go outside and do what I liked to do, as long as I followed the guidelines provided by the CDC.

So I decided to go for walks near the water and to watch the sunset and walk through the grass barefoot and feel the connection with earth and its energy.

Sam helped me think about how I could take better care of myself. Now, instead of overeating, I treat myself to ice cream once a week. I started to meditate again, as I had learned to do years before. I listen to music and talk with my family regularly. I video chat with my grandkids—they are my motor—every other day to keep my heart pumping happily and my mood elevated. And I watch the news only once a week. That is enough to be informed but not overwhelmed. These forms of self-care have helped me feel much better.

You Are Not Alone

When I work with clients in mental health and substance-abuse recovery, I sometimes share a part of my story. It helps my clients see that they are not alone. I hope sharing all of this with you, dear reader, has been helpful. If the pandemic has caused you to feel strange things and act in a wacky manner, you are not alone! Here are some phone numbers and websites that may be of use to those of you interested in getting back on the sunlit path in the midst of a dark pandemic.

[Mindfulness Meditation](#) with Jon Kabat-Zinn.

[National Suicide Prevention Lifeline:](#)

1-800-273-8255

[SAMHSA’s National Helpline:](#)

1-800-662-HELP (4357)

AFTER YOU READ: What self-care strategies have worked (and not worked) for you? Explore the resources Zenaida recommends and report back something that you learned.

Zenaida Garcia is from San Juan, Puerto Rico. She currently lives in Providence, Rhode Island. She is a freshman at the Community College of RI, and she has worked for three years as a Peer Recovery Specialist at the Providence Center. Listen to this interview with her and her teacher at <https://explore.thepublicradio.org/stories/zenaida-and-the-vaiven/>.



A Path through the Pain

Joseph Brooks

BEFORE YOU READ:

- 1) What have you learned from painful experiences? What skills have you gained? Could you use them on your career path?
- 2) Read the box below to make sure you know what LGBTQ stands for.

Trauma and Poverty

I have never had a comfortable life. I grew up in poverty, wearing hand-me-downs. In my life, I have been through many traumatic situations common to LGBTQ youth who experience neglect and abuse. I lived a life of drugs and criminal behaviors which was my way to cover up my sexual orientation. Now, being six months clean from drugs and crime, I know what I'm meant to do with my life and my career.

A Voice for My Community

I want to be a substance abuse counselor. I want to be a voice for the LGBTQ community. I want to



help addicts learn that there is a positive way out of the shadows of this disease and into the light of numerous possibilities. I want them to learn that it is possible to get the love and support they need to succeed in whatever they choose as their career path.

LGBTQ stands for...

Lesbian: women who love and are attracted to women

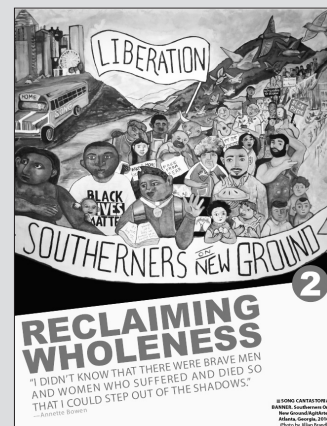
Gay: men who love and are attracted to men

Bi-sexual: people who are attracted to either sex

Transgender: people who are a different gender than the one they were assigned at birth

Queer: formerly an insult, queer is now a term that describes anyone outside of rigidly defined gender/sexuality “norms”

See the “Reclaiming Wholeness” section (pp. 17-28) of Issue #44 of *The Change Agent* for more definitions and discussion.



I want to help them learn these things before they learn the hard way – by being put in prison or an institution, or suffering a terrible ordeal. I want to provide outlets so that they can be their better selves. I want to “pay it forward” and be an advocate for these young people.

My Career Path

While I am serving my prison term, I am staying away from drugs and the people who use them behind the wall. I am attending substance abuse classes taught by my role model, Walter R. He

Most important for my career path is my personal experience with addiction.

gives me resources so I can learn how to become a licensed addiction counselor. He also advises me on finding grants and scholarships that I might be eligible for. I have taken a Sociology class and earned three college credits. These credits will go toward an undergraduate degree in Behavioral Sciences and Addictions. Most important for my career path is my personal experience with addiction. That is something they can’t teach you in textbooks.



To all the people out there reading this, remember: There is more to life than drugs and wild nights. Find the people out there who are positive and supportive of you moving forward in your life. Befriend those people. Stick with them!

Joseph Brooks was recently released from the Worcester County House of Corrections, and he now lives in Boston, MA. He is a sincere, goal-oriented individual with a passion to help those who are struggling with addictions. He wants to be a role model for LGBTQ youth so that he can finally give back.

A Peer Specialist Has “Been There! Done That!”

According to the article, name four specific experiences that Joseph Brooks has that will prepare him for his career path.

Look at the checklist on p. 19. List some more skills that Joseph Brooks might have due to past experiences. How would these help his work as an addiction counselor?

Why do you think it might be true that people working with peers report:



Improved
quality of life



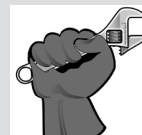
Decreased
depression



Better relationships
with providers



Less substance
abuse



Higher rates of
employment

Source: www.mentalhealthamerica.net/conditions/peer-support-get-facts

I Got Help And Now I Help Others

Alex Tingler

Image by David Mark Pixabay

BEFORE YOU READ: Look at the subheadings and the chart. What will this article will be about?

Raised by Parents with Addictions

Growing up I never had a stable home. My parents were both addicts. My dad left when I was a child and my mom would randomly leave me with people while she was out using drugs. When I was six years old, my aunt finally took me in as one of her own, but she was an addict as well. Next thing I knew, I was that girl living in

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a house with drug paraphernalia scattered all over, and random strangers coming in and out at all hours of the night. I remember nights when my aunt would wake me up because she was having drug-induced paranoia that someone was

outside watching us. She would rub Vaseline all over the windows so no one could see in.

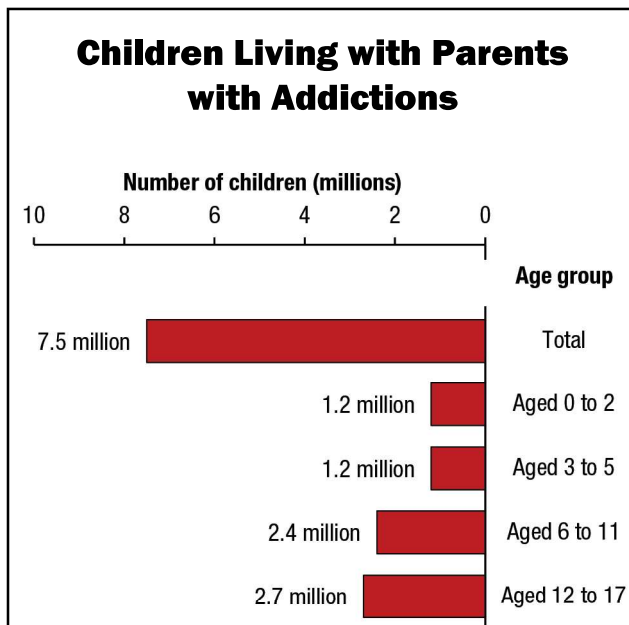
As a child, I had to fend for myself, so I was a lot more mature than your average 12 year old. I never celebrated holidays or birthdays. I didn't have toys like other children did, so I couldn't relate to what they did for "fun." I didn't fit in with any specific group of people my age. I watched drugs destroy my family and I remember being that little girl who swore never to do drugs. But all my life I just wanted to be loved. I wanted to

be accepted, so I started hanging out with the older cool kids and partying. My dad passed away from an overdose when I was 13 years old. During that time, my aunt would go on binges. She would disappear for days, sometimes weeks, at a time, which meant I needed to stay home to watch her kids.

I missed so many days of school, I failed all my classes. I dropped out of the eighth grade, and my partying took off from there. It went from an occasional thing to an every-chance thing. I went from smoking weed, to smoking weed and drinking, to doing anything I could get my hands on. I found freedom in getting high and for the first time in my life, I was comfortable. I was no longer that scared little girl. Eventually, I fell in love with and became addicted to opiates. I absolutely hated the person that I had become. I was just like my mom and my aunt, the two people I resented the most.

In Treatment, Angry, and Scared

I've been arrested numerous times for possession and possession with intent to distribute. When I was 22 years old, I was sentenced to a year in prison. Once I completed my year, I was accepted into the Anne Arundel County Circuit Drug Court Program, and I was sent to treatment. When I arrived in treatment, I was angry and scared. I told my counselor I wasn't planning on staying. In response, she asked me to complete a written assignment before I acted on impulse. The question was, "What would my life be like if I left treatment?" Somehow, that question interrupted my anger and fear, and I could think for a minute.



Number of children living with at least one parent with a substance use disorder in the past year: annual average, 2009 to 2014. Source: <https://www.samhsa.gov/>

I remember telling myself that instead of viewing this as a punishment, maybe I could view it as an opportunity.

I sat still and took the suggestions that were given to me, and I successfully completed an 18-month program. I know now that my problem was more than my addiction. It was the trauma of being abandoned and feeling not good enough as a child. The program gave me the tools to cope. Instead of using drugs to self-medicate, I attended therapy and 12-step meetings, and I built relationships with people who have the same goals.

Clean and Sober

Have I fully recovered? Absolutely not. This is a battle I have to face on a daily basis. On bad days, I have to face it minute by minute. I have to recognize my progress and tell myself I am not the person I was before.

No matter how I feel, I still get up, dress up, show up, and never give up. Today, I have been given my life back. I have four years and six months clean and sober. I have rebuilt relation-

ships with my family. I have rebuilt trust. I am able to show up for the ones I love, and I continue to work towards cleaning up the wreckage of my past. I am currently enrolled in a high school diploma program to achieve my long-term goals.

A Point of Light in Darkness

Recently, I was given an assignment to write an email to my local elected official about a community issue. I remember thinking to myself, "This is a waste of my time."

I didn't think anyone cared about the opinion of a convicted felon.

Surprisingly, my elected official responded to my letter, and we

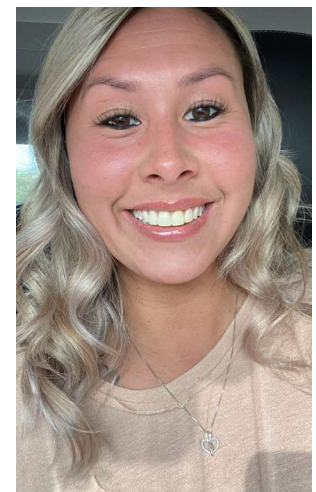
spoke on the phone. I

was open and honest about who I was and who I am, and I was even able to advise him on an issue he's been having in the community regarding a recovery house.

My past doesn't define who I am today. I am now working in the same treatment facility that helped transform me into a woman I never thought I could be. When I was a child, I never had a vision of my future, but today, I do. I have the opportunity to pursue my dream of helping others. I can be a point of light in a world of darkness and watch others transform as they find their purpose in life. I can make a difference.

AFTER YOU READ: In your own words, re-tell the sequence of events in Alex's life. What is the "point of light" in the darkness?

Alexandra Tingler is a 27-year-old recovering addict from Pasadena, Maryland. She works full time at a women and children's addiction treatment facility while also obtaining her diploma from the National External Diploma Program.



When I was a child, I never had a vision of my future, but today, I do.

I Am a Survivor and an Advocate

Peer specialists in prison help others and themselves

Sergio Hyland

BEFORE YOU READ: Think about the meaning of the word “peer.” Who are your peers? Why might peers be good at helping each other?

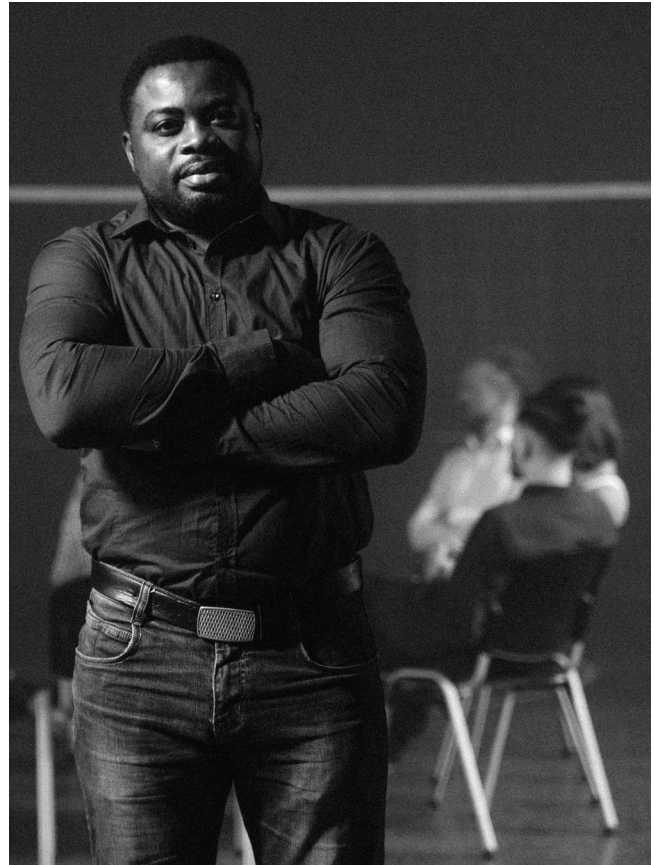
Can’t Rely on Prison Staff

Since the Covid-19 pandemic hit, prisoners all across America have been suffering from diagnosed and undiagnosed mental health issues, mainly depression, anxiety, panic attacks, and suicidal thoughts. I witness these issues firsthand. In fact, I’ve suffered from them myself. Most prisoners feel that we can’t rely on prison staff and administrators to treat our mental health needs adequately. So we have Certified Peer Specialists (CPS) to help mitigate the depressing consequences of the pandemic.

At my prison, I work as a Certified Peer Specialist (CPS), and I enjoy my job. It’s very challenging, but it’s also very rewarding. As a CPS, my primary objective is to focus on a peer’s recovery. Nearly 20% of Americans are diagnosed with a mental disorder in any given year. It’s likely that plenty of your peers are dealing with mental health issues, too. Therefore, it’s in all of our best interests to know how to support those who are struggling, so that they can begin the process of recovery.

A Foundation of Love

From a CPS standpoint, recovery means to remember who you are, and use your strengths to become all that you were meant to be. Sometimes, after a person is diagnosed with some form of mental condition, they start to feel as though their diagnosis is *who they are*; they begin to feel stigmatized. They “lose their self.” In the recovery paradigm, we counter that narrative by reminding a peer of their good qualities. They are more



Tima Miroshnichenko, pexels.com

than their diagnosis. We also make it clear that recovery isn’t our job; it’s up to each peer to embark upon their own path of recovery. However, we play a role in helping them find their path. My job is to be with a peer who is suffering or headed toward a crisis. Sometimes a person just needs to be validated as a human being.

The CPS approach to recovery is based on a foundation of love. We offer these key recovery pathways:

- We instill hope, partly by modeling our own recovery.
- We remind peers that they have choices.

- We point out where they are already powerful so they can claim their own empowerment.
- We encourage them to put themselves in social and cultural environments that promote recovery.
- And we encourage them to embrace a higher being or meaning for survival.

It Helps Me When I Help Others

Helping others on their path to recovery has been very therapeutic to me. We all need to be reminded of our humanity; we need to know that we're loved and appreciated. It's sad – but honest – to say that the prison environment doesn't promote a culture of love, empathy, and understanding. Still, I'm encouraged by the ways that many prisoners – especially the elders – have come together and given support to other prisoners in need. When I mentor the younger guys here, I keep in mind their internal suffering, and I'm always sure to remind them of their positive qualities, so that they can find the strength to move forward in such a depressing environment.

I'm no different than anybody else. I suffer just as much as any other person in prison – or anywhere for that matter. But when I have the opportunity to give support to another human being, I feel as if I've taken another step forward on my own recovery path. Being there for my peers has taught me to have empathy and respect for the struggles of others, and to see myself more clearly.

Let's face it, prisons weren't created with humanity in mind. Needless to say, they are not equipped to treat people with mental health issues. Yet mental wellness isn't impossible to achieve – even in prison. Recovery is sometimes a lifelong process. But we don't have to be victims of our ailment. No matter who you are or where you live, you have the ability to be a part of the solution. You have the strength to help others, and in the process, you will help yourself. I truly believe that the best deed any person can perform, is to serve the needs of others. That's what keeps me going in such a desperate situation as this.

AFTER YOU READ:

1. According to the author, why is it helpful to have Certified Peer Specialists in prison?
2. The articles on pp. 26-27 and 30-31 are also about people who work as or hope to work as peer counselors. What are some common themes in their stories?

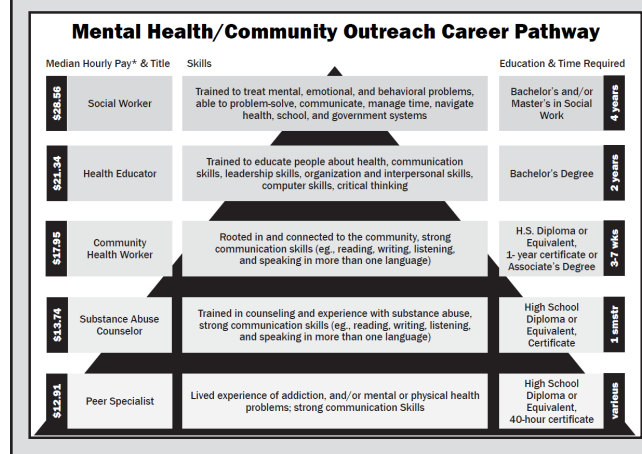
Sergio Hyland is a writer, editor, podcaster, and Certified Peer Specialist. He is in prison in Chester, PA.

Source: www.samhsa.gov.

Become a Peer Specialist

A peer specialist is someone who shares the experience of living with a mental illness or addiction. If you are interested in becoming a peer specialist, research what is required in your state to become certified. Check out <https://www.mhanational.org/how-become-peer-support-specialist> for more information and resources.

Becoming a peer specialist could be a first step on a career pathway (see image below). Our "Career Pathways" issue of *The Change Agent* (#45) explores this career pathway (p. 13) as well as many others.



Back to Work and Couldn't Be More Grateful

A Certified Peer Specialist Helps Others—and Himself—Stay Well

Sergio Hyland

Before Covid-19 took over the world and changed the way we do... EVERYTHING, many of us held the kind of jobs that allowed us to mingle, move around, and experience something different every day. That was especially true for me.

I am a Certified Peer Specialist (CPS); and I am a prisoner.

Being incarcerated for such a long time can be depressing. I mean, let's face it, prison isn't a happy place. Due to my many years of incarceration, I took on the typical view of the average prisoner. I was unhappy, depressed, and very

This job helped me to wake each day with hope, excited about what I might hear, and whom I might be able to help.

short on hope. Then I was selected to be a CPS, and everything started to change.

As a CPS, I'm given certain liberties that most prisoners don't enjoy. For instance, while most prisoners are confined to their

respective housing unit, I get to walk around the prison, talking to staff and prisoners alike, hearing stories and listening to people reminisce on better days. My job was to support others, but I found it to be therapeutic for me too.

This job helped me to wake each day with hope, excited about what I might hear, and whom I might be able to help. Then, in March of 2020, everything changed. First, our in-person visits



were suspended, then school; before we knew it, all prisons were on an enhanced lockdown. All prisoners were confined to their cells for 23½ hours per day.

I was devastated. I never realized how much I depended on my job for the maintenance of my mental health. After a few days of this enhanced lockdown, I found myself slipping back into a deep state of depression. To make matters worse, no psychologists were available on the inside.

I was on the verge of a mental health crisis. Now, more than a year since this pandemic began, I sometimes wonder how I made it. Things aren't back to normal yet—and they may never be—but I'm back to work, and I couldn't be more grateful.

Since I've been around so long, I'm well known, and prisoners call day and night from every unit to speak with me. I feel a sense of freedom each time I put on my green shirt that says "CPS" on the back. When I'm walking down the long, empty hallways to do my job, I know that I'm on my way to provide support for a fellow human being. The only real difference now is that it isn't just a green shirt anymore, it's also a green mask!

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Still, working during this pandemic has its challenges. For instance, because of the potential for spreading Covid-19, I'm only allowed to provide support for those prisoners who reside in the same tower as me. I understand the need for caution, but I still miss talking to those whom I used to assist regularly.

One of the skills I learned as a CPS was to help someone recognize the difference between what it feels like to be well versus unwell. That way, we can see the signs of a potential crisis, and implement measures to avert it. Being back at work has enabled me to see the difference between what I look like when I'm well, and what I look like when I'm unwell. I never thought that a job would contribute so much to my wellness. If my own mental wellness is attached to my abil-

ity to help others be well, then I believe I play a critical role in the overall wellness of my community. And I hope to be able to continue playing that role when I'm out of prison.



AFTER YOU READ: According to the author, how does his job support his mental health? Describe the ways your job supports or detracts from your mental wellness.

Sergio Hyland has written many articles for The Change Agent. He edits the prison newsletter, he has a podcast at [Prison Radio](#), and his Instagram is Uptown Serg. He is incarcerated in Chester, PA.

Learn about Careers in Peer Support

Read more stories by adult learners who found careers as peer support specialists. Alex Tingler (below left) is a recovering addict who works at an addiction treatment facility in Maryland. Zenaida Garcia (center), who suffered depression and abuse, works as a Peer Recovery Specialist in Rhode Island. Sergio Hyland is a trauma survivor and Certified Peer Specialist at the prison where he is incarcerated in Pennsylvania. Explore a career in peer support by looking at [this collection](#) of stories and career ladders. Find more career exploration activities under "Extras" for [Issue #53](#).

I Got Help And Now I Help Others

Alex Tingler

BEFORE YOU READ: Look at the subheadings and the chart. What will this article be about?

Raised by Parents with Addictions

Growing up I never had a stable home. My parents were both addicts. My dad left when I was a child and my mom would randomly leave me with people while she was out using drugs. When I was six years old, my aunt finally took me in as one of her own, but she was an addict as well. Next thing I knew, I was that girl living in a house with drug paraphernalia scattered all over, and random strangers coming in and out all hours of the night.

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outside watching us. She over the windows so no one As a child, I had to feel I never celebrated holidays have toys like other children late to what they did for any specific group of people destroy my family. That little girl who swore all my life I just wanted to



My Couch, My Walls, My Hair What to Do (and Not to Do!) for your Mental Health During a Pandemic

Zenaida Garcia

My Work and My Wacky Moments

Part of my job is to be well and to help others find wellness. But sometimes we all lose the sunlit path. We find ourselves wandering into darkness. In this essay, I'm going to take you on my journey into the darkness of depression and show you how I found my way back to the path.

Like many Americans, before the Covid-19 pandemic struck, I was more or less fine. Then, things changed. Because of Covid-19 the city bus became a scary place; a stranger's coughing made me

induced anxiety. At work, I was to see my clients except through myself isolated. I hit a low.

I work as a Peer Recovery mental health center. As part of people and support them in the them know that they're not alone there is a better life out there. If me, too. It gives my life purpose.

But sometimes my clients share their innermost secrets with some of my own. I know how to do things that we're not used to, such as the one we're not out strange feelings. Here are some pandemic moments. I share here so you can see you are not have to throw away your furniture don't have to repaint your entire I did; you don't have to cut off did. You can learn from my failures better, as well as from my successes.

And Scared

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Furniture / Paint / Hair

I live in a small apartment. When I moved in, my son bought me a beautiful, comfortable, beige couch. I loved it. So many beautiful memories happened on that couch. My grandson's face used to light up when he jumped on it—he thought he was Superman! I used to catch him and tickle him and hug him. I taught him how to read on that couch. And I told him bedtime stories on that couch until he fell asleep, getting drool on my beautiful bubble chair.

making me stir-crazy! I away my couch. I was stuck for what seemed like forever. I was suffering from induced claustrophobia. I posted on Facebook—"and it didn't in it. The couch was n't gone? My anxiety was closing in on me. color started irritate the bone white. I was pushing serotonin away and picked white paint. And, it did my best color. But what it session. Even as the

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I Am a Survivor and an Advocate Peer specialists in prison help others and themselves

Sergio Hyland

BEFORE YOU READ: Think about the meaning of "peer." Who are your peers? Why might you be helping each other?

on Prison Staff

Covid-19 pandemic hit, prisoners all over the world have been suffering from undiagnosed mental health issues, depression, anxiety, panic attacks, and thoughts. I witness these issues firsthand, suffered from them myself. Most prisoners that we can't rely on prison staff and officers to treat our mental health needs. So we have Certified Peer Specialists help mitigate the depressing consequences of the pandemic.

In prison, I work as a Certified Peer Specialist (CPS), and I enjoy my job. It's very challenging, but it's also very rewarding. As a CPS, my objective is to focus on a peer's recovery. 20% of Americans are diagnosed with mental health issues, too. Therefore, it's in all of our best interests to know how to support those who are so that they can begin the process of recovery.

ation of Love

From a standpoint, recovery means to re-learn who you are, and use your strengths to that you were meant to be. Sometimes, a person is diagnosed with some form of mental health issue, they start to feel stigma. They "lose their self." In the recovery process, we counter that narrative by reminding of their good qualities. They are more than their diagnosis. We also make it clear that recovery isn't our job; it's up to each peer to embark upon their own path of recovery. However, we play a role in helping them find their path. My job is to be with a peer who is suffering or headed toward a crisis. Sometimes a person just needs to be validated as a human being.

The CPS approach to recovery is based on a foundation of love. We offer these key recovery pathways:



Tara Minichewski, postcard.com

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Putting Experience to Work

Latino Health Access

Community Health Workers (also called *promotores*) are experts from the community. They speak

We go to the streets every day to find women like us.

Santa Ana, California, describes how she reaches out to survivors of domestic abuse:

We go to the streets every day to find women like us. Women who are suffering violence in secret like I was. We offer tortillas. When women come to get free tortillas, we tell them, "Tortillas are part of our culture but violence is not." ... My objective is for any woman in

the same language and share many of the same problems as the people they are reaching out to. Norma, a Community Health Worker from

need to know that she does not have to take the violence, and that I will be there for her when she is ready.

Tere, another Community Health Worker, is a mother from the community, just like the people she is trying to reach. She says:

I give information with my own words, my vocabulary, and they feel that I am really talking to them. Some people have a lot of education, but not many. There are people who cannot fill out a form. I know what it's like because sometimes I have trouble filling out forms. I normally say, "I'll help you if you like." I do not ask if they can read or write. ... I know I have

When they feel confident, they start to open their hearts.



Latino Health Access in Santa Ana, California, employs Community Health Workers to deliver much-needed health services to people in the community. Photo (used with permission) from: <www.latinohhealthaccess.org>.

many things in common with the people I am reaching out to. When they feel confident, they start to open their hearts, their trust, and their doors to us. It is what happened to me when I told my group about the loss of my baby. I saw their sad faces. A mom approached me and thanked me because it had happened to her. And another mom told me, "I thank you because I lost my baby at four months, and I could not talk about it." I said, "That happened to me when I lost my baby. I could not talk about it. I felt that it blocked me." When someone listens to you without judging, you feel like you are part of a family that you do not know. They open their hearts and they don't judge you. Then you can confide in each other. But if you feel judged, you immediately block yourself. We promotoras, we know about loss and pain, so people feel like they can approach us.

Source: Excerpted from *Recruiting the Heart, Training the Brain: The Work of Latino Health Access (LHA)* by America Bracho, et al., Hesperian Health Guides, Berkeley, CA, 2016 <www.hesperian.org>. Thanks to LHA and Hesperian for permission to excerpt.

AFTER YOU READ:

- 1)** What are some specific ways Norma and Tere reach out to women in their community?
- 2)** Read the articles on pp. 10-11 and pp. 14-15. What experiences do these writers have that might make them excellent Community Health Workers?
- 3)** Look up what you would need to do to be a Community Health Worker in your state. (It is different in every state.)
- 4)** Share a situation in your life when it would be helpful to have a community health worker.

Mental Health/Community Outreach Career Pathway

Median Hourly Pay* & Title	Skills	Education & Time Required
\$28.56 Social Worker	Trained to treat mental, emotional, and behavioral problems, able to problem-solve, communicate, manage time, navigate health, school, and government systems	Bachelor's and/or Master's in Social Work 4 years
\$21.34 Health Educator	Trained to educate people about health, communication skills, leadership skills, organization and interpersonal skills, computer skills, critical thinking	Bachelor's Degree 2 years
\$17.95 Community Health Worker	Rooted in and connected to the community, strong communication skills (eg., reading, writing, listening, and speaking in more than one language)	H.S. Diploma or Equivalent, 1-year certificate or Associate's Degree 3-7 wks
\$13.74 Substance Abuse Counselor	Trained in counseling and experience with substance abuse, strong communication skills (eg., reading, writing, listening, and speaking in more than one language)	High School Diploma or Equivalent, Certificate 1 smstr
\$12.91 Peer Specialist	Lived experience of addiction, and/or mental or physical health problems; strong communication Skills	High School Diploma or Equivalent, 40-hour certificate various

* According to www.bls.gov. Sources: <www.payscale.com>, <healthcareersnw.org/career-paths/mental-health>