

A Path to Wellness: Finding My Purpose

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No matter who you are, you can make plans, but your purpose in life may emerge from an unexpected event. My experiences serve as an example of how even the best of plans can suddenly get overturned.

Early in my life, I thought I was destined to become a behavioral analyst for the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), but my career goal was derailed by forces outside my control. I was raised by a single mother who battled substance use and had barely enough to provide for a family of five. My home was plagued by conflict, and I became a victim of violence. I was exposed to crime indirectly, watching others engage in criminal activity to survive poverty. I myself engaged in crimes to feed my siblings and myself during hard times. I then realized that I had to do something that I felt was meaningful. I wanted to save lives, and at that time, a career in the FBI felt like the right way to do that. I became a perfectionist for whom failure was not an option and became a model student and citizen.

As a young adult working toward my professional goal, I jumped straight into college. I obtained a bachelor's of science degree in psychology, finishing with a 3.8 grade point average (GPA), and completed a master's program in general psychology, achieving a 4.0 GPA. I then aimed for a doctoral degree in cognition and instruction in psychology. Meanwhile, I was working for a statewide parent advocacy network as an inclusion coordinator, a parent resource specialist, a consultant, and a trainer. I was well on my way to success, making more money than I could previously imagine. But I was not prepared for the unexpected change in my life that was about to happen. As I mentioned above, one can make plans, but one's true purpose may come from unexpected life events.

In 2016, after my first residency, I first noticed signs that my original plan might change. I started experiencing insomnia, eventually going without sleep for long periods. I kept working but also started to engage in risky behaviors. I began disappearing from home and my family for weeks and then months at a time. I left my fiancé for someone else who was living a risky lifestyle. This new person eventually became my spouse and a major part of my life. I engaged in substance use to enhance and cope with my new lifestyle. I also started drinking heavily, and I began smoking to alleviate anxiety and stress.

Then came the hard substances, such as cocaine, fentanyl, and crystal meth, which became my main go-to sources to treat mental health symptoms I was not previously aware I had—I would take anything I could get my hands on to block out what was happening to me. Unsurprisingly, I ended up quitting my job, dropping out of university, and becoming homeless. I was extremely distressed, trying to cope with substance use in a situation I had not planned for. I no longer wanted to work for the FBI because I was unable to manage my life, and I discontinued my studies. I thought that I had failed and that I now was a lost cause. I was off my planned path and felt broken both inside and outside.

During these struggles, I was hospitalized multiple times for both my mental health and substance use. One of the most traumatic events occurred on April 17, 2018, at 10:36 p.m., when I was pronounced dead as a result of an overdose at home. My body was about to be bagged and processed when a health care provider administered Narcan (naloxone) one more time; I woke up near midnight. I was scared because I had no idea what was going on. I was doing my hair one moment, and in the next, I found myself cold and stiff as a board. Yet I still was able to think, breathe, and resume my normal activities. My return from a very close brush with death was a miracle, but at the time I did not know this. I went back to my dysfunctional lifestyle because I did not get the help I needed. I continued to use substances and was not consistent with managing my mental health, resulting in a cycle of one failed treatment after another.

A glimmer of hope arose in July 2022 when I met an outreach worker through a peer support program connected with the transit police at the location where I was panhandling. It was the beginning of a truly positive change. The peer support specialist, along with the transit police team, helped me get admitted to detoxification treatment and long-term rehabilitation programs. During that treatment, I learned that I had not only bipolar disorder but also posttraumatic stress disorder, anxiety, and depression. Now, it all made sense—I had been dealing with many untreated mental health conditions. What I needed now was to seek treatment to learn more about myself and heal. I learned that although I have a mental disorder, I can still live a normal life. I gained confidence in being okay with who I am. One day, I went back to thank the peer support agency,

Collaborative Support Programs of New Jersey (CSPNJ), that had helped me to find treatment.

Gratitude led me to the path I am on today. Thanks to my skills, training, and lived experience, I was hired as a wellness mentor at the CSPNJ Better Life Community Wellness Center (CWC), giving me an opportunity to follow a path that can save lives. I got a chance to work on additional projects with CWC, including conducting satisfaction surveys for support services programs. I was a full-time wellness mentor before quickly becoming the resource specialist at the CWC. In that role, I have shared my life experience multiple times with other staff and peers. It is extremely rewarding to help my peers who are dealing with substance use, mental health challenges, and homelessness. Having grappled with these issues myself, I can provide hope for others so that these challenges do not cause more harm to them. I can engage with and support fellow peers so that they can access providers and services to support their wellness when needed.

I also realized that I had a lot of trauma stemming from my unresolved childhood problems, substance use, and experiences of homelessness, all of which had made it difficult to maintain a job and relationships and to manage my health. According to a report by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (1), trauma can negatively influence an individual's beliefs about the future. Although I was receiving mental health treatment, medications helped me only until their effects wore off. I therefore realized that I needed to seek care from a trauma specialist. Now, having found such a specialist, my battle with mental health is no longer a war. Since November 2023, I am no longer required to use medications as part of my treatment. I have learned coping mechanisms to help deal with experiences that trigger manic episodes. I am a self-proclaimed rebel today, and to continue to address substance use, I have a sponsor who helps me understand that the use was a symptom of my traumatic experiences.

However, trauma therapy and learning effective coping skills were not enough because I still had negative feelings about myself. I also had to wage war on the social stigma of having a mental health condition. It was time for me to stop feeling different because of my mental illness. Through recovery step work, I now focus on self-

acceptance. I started to become more self-aware and more at peace with who I am. I started focusing on what I can do and became more accepting of myself and my limitations. This tactic made balancing my daily activities without triggering symptoms much easier for me.

I value the simplicity of being okay and of acknowledging that I am human. I became proud of myself because my mental health is what makes me unique. My hope is that by sharing these experiences, I can help individuals who find it difficult to accept their mental health challenges and feelings to become more accepting of themselves. Mental illness, substance use, and homelessness are experiences we can endure, adapt to, and eventually transform. Thanks to dealing with both my substance use and mental health, I am no longer homeless. I am working, mentally tranquil, and substance free.

Today, my true purpose may not be the one I had originally planned for. However, the many life challenges I encountered gave me an opportunity to reach out and connect with individuals who face similar challenges to offer them hope and support. I try to help people understand that regardless of the obstacles and challenges they are dealing with, they have a real purpose in life.

I live my purpose one day at a time. I am Lasheema Nelida Sander-Edwards, and my purpose is to share my story to improve lives by saying that it's okay to experience mental health problems, substance use, and homelessness. We all have a purpose, and we all are unique.

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