

How ECT led me out of the dark world of depression

BY RACHEL POST
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

The suicide epidemic we face deeply saddens me so I offer my experience to give others hope. It was like a switch had been flicked off. There I am, one day smiling happily with my then 6-year-old daughter on New Year's day, 2015 at a playground, and the next memory I have was crying in my friend's arms, still January, saying "I'm scared, something's wrong with me." I'd battled depression before, the last time resulting from a series of suicides at work involving me as the first responder. While I had to take a leave from work, it was more rapidly responsive to a combination of medications and therapy. This time was different. Nothing was working.

The first time my doctor talked to me about ECT – Electroconvulsive Therapy – I dismissed it. I had too many images in my head of shock therapy as it used to be known in the movies: traumatized, lobotomized, broken patients like in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. I didn't stop to think the movie was 41 years old; I didn't realize that today's treatment no more resembles what happened to Jack Nicholson's character than today's computers resemble ones from the same era.

While I kept telling everyone closest to me that "I can't think my way out of a box," my anxiety remained Herculeanly strong. I imagined I would have to quit my job, lose my house and move in with family. At least I was rich in that regard; my family would take us in, while thousands of tragic souls sleeping on our streets were not so lucky. I'd seen so many of their stories unfold in

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my work over the last 16 years in Portland and Denver. But I wasn't at all sure I could keep myself alive. I took leave from work to lay in bed with a bottle of benzodiazepines and a bottle of rum, contemplating the deadly mix, but I guess I was too scared to try it. I enrolled in an outpatient treatment program five afternoons a week, its only purpose as far as I was concerned was to get me out of bed, out of the house and away from the potential of suicide during those hours.

I can't express in words how unbearable and exhausting simple things were; getting out of bed and fulfilling my responsibilities as a mother. The worst were the weekends when I had to find ways to keep my daughter occupied. My entire day revolved around getting to the end of it when I could go to bed and shut down my consciousness. That was my only peace.

After a year of this existence, I realized my daughter and I had suffered enough. Family and friends expressed their grave concerns and even my colleague shared, "I miss you" one day when I spoke about my condition. What he meant was that the Rachel he knew to be driven and focused was gone, replaced by a vacuous stranger.

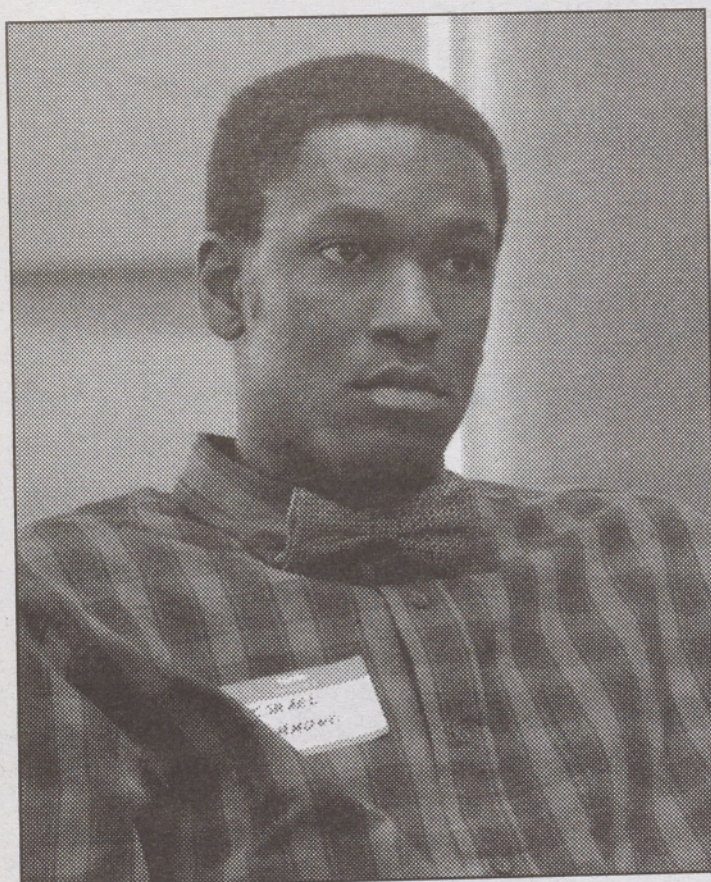
The doctor gave me the odds: 50 percent of ECT patients experience no relief but I had reached my bottom and felt I couldn't subject my daughter to my debilitating depression any longer. I had already lost my self-respect, my intelligence, my fight and my joy for life.

My family and employer stood by in full support. My brother flew in for the first treatment and one loving friend from afar jokingly texted me that morning, "Don't forget me!" I texted back, "We'll see."

It worked. I noticed within the first month of treatments that I was improving and by the end of the second, my family, friends and colleagues noticed my return. I've been free of depression for over a year and a half! Now, the highlight of my day is getting out of bed in the morning, kissing my daughter and the thrill I get from my work each day. Last summer my work included presenting at a Congressional Briefing, attending a White House presentation by the Surgeon General, and meeting with members of Congress. Over the past year I have hosted a couple of great fundraisers (one for the Affordable Housing Bond and the other for a candidate for the Portland Public School Board) and my daughter's birthday party.

My doctor tells me that if ECT works, the odds are that it will always work. You can't develop a resistance to it the way you can with medications. My only regret is that I didn't have someone like me post-ECT, on the other side of the deep, dark, terrifying depression to talk to me so that my daughter and I didn't have to endure 12 months of misery before trying it.

ECT is not a first resort for treating depression and can't help everybody. But if you or someone you know is suffering from depression, don't be afraid of it. Educate yourself. Talk to your doctors; talk to someone who's had it. And never give up. ECT saved my life and it could save you or someone you love.



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Israel Hammond, 21, is one of two dozen youth putting on Saturday's event.

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— ISRAEL HAMMOND
YOUTH ORGANIZER, PORTLAND BLACK MALE ACHIEVEMENT

ROLE MODELS, from page 10

having black women be there to talk to our young men, to help them grow. We are also trying to get to the point where women are mentors too, because this is an open invitation to everyone who wants to mentor youth, but also who have youth they would like to be mentored.

E.G.: *Israel, can you tell me about a role model that's made a difference in your life?*

I.H.: For me, my biggest role model has been my father. I was born and raised in Charlotte, N.C., and so a lot of the experiences that I'm having here in Portland, as someone from the South, I see my father going through the same thing, and so with that it's been a pleasure for me to be able to live with him and see how he interacts with this city and things of that nature.

E.G.: *How do you think your life might have been different if you didn't have your father as your role model growing up?*

I.H.: It would have been immensely different. I feel like, whenever you have a role model, it's not just someone that you look up to, it's someone that you actively emulate and learn from. So for me, had I actively emulated someone who wasn't a role model to me, or someone who just wasn't that I felt was influential toward me,

I would then be led into whichever direction that's unbeknownst to me and I don't feel like I would be as developed as I am had I not had a mentor, had I not had someone who is in my life feeding me information, pushing to a higher level, and things of that nature.

E.G.: *Since you've been in the Summer Youth Experience program, have you found yourself reaching out to others to mentor?*

I.H.: What (CJ and Walter) have really started to open my eyes to is the fact that this is my program, this is the youth's program, and so why not do what we are trying to preach which is being mentors? I am one of the oldest that's in the group, so that falls on my shoulders, so I feel like I've really been able to speak into their lives and live out what it means. I feel like mentorship isn't just with words, it's with actions, and deeds, and so being able to do that for others is something that I enjoy doing. I'm going back to school early at George Fox because I'm going to be a mentor on campus for the incoming freshmen. It goes way beyond my personal circle, pushing into different areas. I think it's really what's needed in order to reach those who are marginalized.

E.G.: *What does it take to be a mentor and what does that look like?*

CJ.R.: For me, mentoring goes a lot

further than just the formal efforts. I think that's what their event is a recognition of; if it's just the formal efforts, you are going to have young men who are saying, "I don't have any role models" because they are going to have to have some level of connection with a system to be able to access that. Let's look at all the resources that we have in our community, in the broad community of Portland, and bring them to bear on mentoring, and that means that we have to tap into informal mentoring as well. That looks like the barbershops, street corners, the classroom, the hallways at the school – anywhere that there's a need.

For black men and boys, it has to have some level of cultural specificity to it. In other words, how does this person that I'm connecting with identify, and how do I enter into that space and gain the trust of that person to get a deeper understanding of who they are so that I can be a part of lifting them up and be a part of helping them grow, and within that, I can grow within myself.

W.R.II: I think that in order to empower someone, you have to be able to actively listen to hear how you can empower them. If you are truly wanting to be a mentor, understand that you have someone else's life in your hands to a certain extent, and they are trusting and counting on you.

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