

A conversation with Mandi Luis about 'Working Through It'

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Mary Ann: Mandi Luis is the person who provided the inspiration for the Working Through It project. This project will be a series of web-based videos that feature people who have lived and worked with emotional distress including depression or anxiety, talking about how they worked through what sometimes felt like never-ending devastating distress. They will share how they handled relationships, workplace issues, financial concerns, and especially how they were able to reclaim their own well-being. For some this distress was related to workplace issues, for others it was events in their personal life including a diagnosis of cancer, and for some their distress was complicated by their use of alcohol or drugs. For some, it seemed to come out of nowhere and take over their lives.

These inspiring individuals share from their own experience, suggestions and ideas that they know made a difference to their own ability to navigate out of hopelessness towards wellness. The videos will provide comments that will help the viewer to answer their own real life questions at work, off work or returning to work, such as:

What is happening to me? Why is this such a struggle? Who can help me at work? What should I say? How can I begin to feel better? How can I manage financially? How do I cope at work?

Mandi, can you describe your own experience with emotional distress at work?

Mandi: My situation was largely the result of stressors outside of work. It began with the impact of becoming a single parent of two teenage children, my oldest child being involved with the wrong crowd and my youngest struggling with academic and health concerns. In addition to trying to cope with readjusting our lives, moving from our home, and transferring into a new position at work with more responsibility, I was also hit by an 18-wheeler. Most of this occurred within a six month period. During this time I was trying to do what I had always done, which was to keep my personal life out of the workplace. Each day that I went into work, I was trying very hard to be the same person, but each day I was losing my confidence, becoming more scared and more anxious. I began to avoid my boss and depend heavily on one particular co-worker for support. It became harder and harder to reflect on my work, analyze things objectively or focus on the task at hand. I became so, so scared. After 11 months of struggling to keep up I had totally lost my confidence, began to cry at work and felt negativity from some in the workplace. Unfortunately, I did not get the right help at that time and instead of getting better, I first got much worse. Eventually, I felt that I was such a burden on the team that I made the decision to leave and that resulted in serious financial loss and as you know, a few regrets.

Mary Ann: As Mandi worked on her recovery, she reached out to our organization, Mental Health Works, to ask how she could help others who are in the situation she was in. We decided that she should write an article about what she wished she had known when she was working through her ordeal. The result is an amazing feature you can find at www.mentalhealthworks.com called 'What I Wish I Knew: A snapshot of my experience with mental illness at work'. It is both a fascinating and practical resource available at no cost to anyone who chooses to read it. But it is exactly *reading* it that Mandi thought would have presented a problem for her when she was unwell.

Mandi: I was educated, a senior manager, had held several management roles, was always someone who sought out information and initiated obtaining resources for myself and others. The fact that this happened to me was a surprise to myself and to those who knew me. During this time I was so scared and had such anxiety about being unable to perform that it paralyzed me to the point that I could not access my own resources or seek help. I never even thought that there was help and yet, I had once supported one of my own employees through a similar situation. At the time I just could not understand what I needed or where to look for it. More than that, I was unable to focus on complex materials such as the written word. It was for this reason that I said after writing 'What I Wish I Knew', that I probably would not have been able to read it during this period. The only thing that I thought would have been helpful was to have been given a resource, that provided straightforward, practical information, preferably in short and to-the-point video format, that I could use at home. I desperately needed to hear from someone who had been where I was and had returned to wellness and to work successfully. I needed hope because the only messages that I actually heard were that I would be like this forever.

Mary Ann: The problem back in 2004 when Mandi told me this was twofold. One was that Mental Health Works was a non-funded, non-profit, charity program (which translates to, we don't have the money) and the other was that our program was focused on workplace mental health issues and not on the other important factors in Mandi's vision which included navigating through recovery and the disability system. In 2008 we found the perfect partners when Mood Disorders Association of Ontario, who are focused on helping people through the recovery process, and The Great-West Life Assurance Company and their Centre for Mental Health in the Workplace expressed an interest in making Mandi's vision a reality. Mood Disorders Association provided the expertise and resources around the individual journey towards recovery. Great-West Life provided a generous donation to enable Mental Health Works and Mood Disorders to collaborate and develop the videos and supports, access to information to help individuals better understand the disability system, hosting of the final project on their website for anyone to access at no cost, and staff support on project work.

We found 10 people who, like thousands of Canadians, struggled with mental health issues such as depression or anxiety and found a way to reclaim their well-being. It is these individuals who provide the primary resource which are short video clips that provide help, hope, inspiration and practical suggestions. We were also able to engage some of the greatest minds in the field to act as our Professional Advisory Group. This group ensures our work meets their standards and provided us with insight into how we might make it even better.

So now we have the right partners, amazing human beings who are sharing their experiences, funding to get it done. Mandi, what are your hopes for this project?

Mandi: My hope is that those who are experiencing mental health issues will use this resource, feel that they are not alone, understand that there are different paths to recovery and that there *is* recovery. I hope that they will know that life will not always look like it may do today. I also hope that the information we provide will be accessible, when they need it, at various places on the road to recovery, and that they find new ideas and strategies to navigate their own journey towards reclaiming well-being. To sum it up, I hope that this resource provides help, hope and support while they are Working Through It.

Working Through It is available at www.gwlcetreformentalhealth.com
Mental Health Works www.mentalhealthworks.ca

Mood Disorders Association of Ontario www.mooddisorders.ca
Moods Magazine www.moodsmag.com