

PARENT'S PERSPECTIVE

One Safe Place

In support group, I could talk honestly without hurting my chance of bringing my daughter home

BY NICOLE GOODWIN

"You're not a bad parent, Nicole," April said as we sat in the VA hospital support group. The irony of hearing that from someone who hardly knew me hit me to the heart. If she could see the good in how I raised my daughter, why couldn't my so-called friends?

I couldn't speak to my friends. I couldn't explain to them how much having child welfare come back into my life for the second time made me feel like a failure as a parent and a human being.

The worst ridicule came from my best friend, who took on the role of foster father. He scolded me, "How could you do this to your daughter? You don't think of her at all. All you think about is yourself."

My friends were all too angry that I ended up in the hospital—again. That I had tried to take my life—again. That I had let them down—again. I could never truly describe to them what being at war was like: the sights, sounds, smells and feelings of Iraq. All they had to say was, "Nicole is just being Nicole."

DEHUMANIZED

I found that invalidation again in court.

I hated being back in front of the judge, her black robe, her bench higher than every other seat in the room. The flickering fluorescent light in a corner of the courtroom going on and off, second after second. It gave off a purple glow that reminded me of just how off-center my life had become.

Like my friends, the court didn't look at my mental health as part of a lifelong journey, one with pitfalls and curved corners but also smoother roads ahead. They didn't see mental health relapse as a part of recovery. They didn't see my commitment to be well again.

Every sentence simply began with: "Well Ms. Goodwin's past history."

ONE SAFE PLACE

My support group at the VA hospital was what saved me. The group of seven veterans and two doctors focused on building skills to develop better relationships.

For a few months it was difficult for me to talk about anything except the court case and how betrayed I felt. "Teach me how to play the game without being vulnerable." That's all I wanted at first.

But even from the beginning, it felt good to be around people who were also dealing with mental illness and also struggling with relationships since being in the military.

Over time, the rules of the group helped me state my feelings without fear of retaliation. The group became one of the few places where I could talk honestly without fear of endangering my chances of bringing my daughter home.



NICOLE AND RISE STAFF

MY EMPATHY GREW

When April spoke up and said that I was a good mother I felt the tears come down on the inside. I don't like to be vulnerable. I don't like showing I am confused, lonely, broken. But April offered me understanding.

Her support helped me realize positive aspects about my character that made it easier for me to do what I had to do to bring my daughter home. Getting that understanding also helped me be more understanding and empathize more with my daughter and her foster father, which made things easier on all of us. At the same time, I learned that when I'm in need, I don't need to stay with people who don't understand me. I can find people who do.

The more I went to group the more I was able to see the person I wanted to be despite the setbacks. By seeking the compassion in others, I found I could give it to myself.

CARED FOR AND EMPOWERED

It's common for parents who come into the system to be isolated. Having a child welfare case makes many parents even more isolated, which makes it harder for them to succeed. It also means they have fewer people who they and their children can turn to when children go home.

Making sure that parents feel understood is as important to their success—maybe more important—as making sure they receive the proper medication or correct type of therapy.

I can imagine that some caseworkers are skeptical of peer support. And it's probably true that in certain settings, peer support can be a detriment, especially if those peers are prone to giving misinformation. For me, having a therapist along with peer support really helped. But peer support can also help people feel cared for and empowered enough to make choices.

If you care about parents' success, you should keep looking for every opportunity to help them break down their isolation, even when it's hard for them, like it was for me.