

Getting Back My Joy

I'm trying to trade my bad memories for good ones.

By ERICA HARRIGAN

All my happy memories were wiped away when I was very young, since I was in and out of foster care from the age of 2. I remembered things, but only negative things. I could remember the abuse and abandonment, but not the good times our family had.



Erica Harrigan

Maybe it was because when I was in bad situations it was too painful for me to remember the good times. The happiness and joyful moments faded away and were replaced with fear and sadness.

Over time, I developed barriers like anger and hate that are still holding me back from healing. I tend to keep myself miserable and dissatisfied by dwelling on painful events in my life.

Last spring, *Represent* held a Transitions Workshop, where we could work on a change we wanted to make in our lives. I joined the workshop because I wanted to be more happy and less sad. I felt it was time to restore the happy memories I'd lost. I wanted to be able to listen to slow songs without crying, write poetry to express myself and read books related to my issues without it being too emotional for me to handle.

The workshop met once a week and at the beginning we wrote down our goals. My goal was to create a healing process for myself and start to collect new memories, so I wouldn't always be thinking about the negative memories from my painful past.

I would keep a detailed scrapbook that would be a written record of the change I started creating in my life. The book would be a memento I could look at to help me cope with pain.



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Each week, we were supposed to try a different "tool" for handling change (see the list of tools on pages 34-36), and write about our progress. Here's the diary I kept, describing how my change went.

Creating a Scrapbook

I decided to start with a ceremony. I'm going to collect my favorite poetry, song lyrics and quotes from movies or books. I'm also going to express my inner emotions with my own poetry, and then place everything inside my scrapbook organizer. When I have collected everything in my organizer, I will make it into a scrapbook of happy memories.

I feel making a favorites page in my

scrapbook is a step toward healing.

Happy Memories From Mom

I decided to change my tool because my mother was coming to visit me. Instead of creating a ceremony, I decided to interview someone—my mom.

On Friday March 24, my mother and I sat down and tried to figure out ways to remember good times we used to have. I said a little about the things I remembered and she filled in the missing pieces. My mother wasn't sure she could remember much and I wasn't either, but when we were done we had about six pages of good times we used to have. It was all coming back to me.

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 32)



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(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 31)

I remembered that around Christmas time we would go to Macy's department store to see Santa and to Toys "R" Us to shop for gifts. We bought a lot of things like board games and dolls. When we left it seemed as if we'd bought the whole store.

My mother also remembered how around Halloween time we would go shopping for costumes and makeup at a party store. We would go trick or treating at noon around the 'hood, to the pet shop and local candy stores. The pet shop would give out free goldfish. We would change makeup to hit the same places twice.

I remembered the whole family get-

ting along and cooking for Thanksgiving. We had a feast and gave our six cats their own portion.

things over, I had a breakthrough. I realized that seeing my mom was still difficult. What was really going on was that I missed my mom and felt abandoned all over again, even though I wasn't really being abandoned. I was struggling and having a low week. Then I got my bearings again.

Thinking About My Change

This week I decided to use the tool that asks you to think about what the change means to you, and what new opportunities it gives you. I thought about how creating this change is something I need to do for myself. No one else can create this change besides me, but others can be supportive and help me when help is needed.

It's up to me to do what needs to

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I loved the first day of school because I got to go shopping for school supplies and new clothes. According to my mom, I started school early and I was a bright child. I would line the kids up for bathroom time at Head Start. I would put the girls in one line and the boys in the other. I knew my ABC's and how to count to 20.

A Sad Workshop

Even though my visit with my mom went well, I felt sad when I talked about it in the workshop. That seemed like a terrible setback, and I got stuck feeling like I couldn't handle the positive memories at all. I felt bad and low.

But after I went home to think

be done. I will be the one who benefits from a successful change. I have an opportunity to change my way of thinking and restore my positive memories. I am determined to work toward whatever it is that will help me to feel better and enjoy my life more.

Trying to Collect Happiness

This week I read a book called *How to Collect Happiness*. It tells you to make a "happiness list" every day, where you write down five things that happened that day that you feel good about. "These don't have to be Big Things," it says. "Think about the small things you usually don't notice that put a smile on your face."

Trying to heal from my broken past is taking a lot out of me. It's a good deed I am doing, but it's hard because

for so long I have been wearing a mask and I don't know what it looks like under the mask. Am I capable of recovering the joy I once had and collecting happiness? Or did I completely lose the person that once felt happy?

When I started writing down good things that happened each day, it really did help me feel happier and less depressed. I think the book helps more than my mood stabilizers.

By reading the book I learned a little bit about how to collect happiness, but not how to keep it. It's up to me to remain happy after I have collected happiness.

A Private Junk Food Party

Recently I realized that I have to get rid of my first TV, and I fear that I will lose the memories behind it. I bought the TV at a yard sale one hot summer when my caseworker and I went shopping. It is special for me because it's the first TV I owned. It leaves a memory of my old group home and staff.

I don't want to throw the TV away, but it's taking up space. For me to get new furniture and make myself feel better in a clean and well organized home, I have to make sacrifices, even if that means throwing away some important things I have grown to love.

I will take a picture of the TV and place it in my scrapbook, so that I can always look at the picture and remember the good memories. I may not have the TV in my home, but I will still have the memories stored inside the picture. Whenever I miss my TV I can pull out the picture and reminisce. When I finish coping with my loss I will treat myself to a private junk food party.

A Wall of Pictures

This week I have taken pictures of things I like such as a gift that was given to me, places I like to go and things at home that keep me motivated. I also decided to put pictures of family, friends, my cat and myself up on my

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wall to help me remember good times.

Now when I go to bed, I look up at my photo wall. The pictures always make me happy, because they remind me of good times I've had. It helps me sleep peacefully. I am going to take a picture of the wall and place it inside my scrapbook, so I can see it even when I'm not at home. I hope remembering happy

times will help me collect happiness.

Getting the Giggles

I had the giggles earlier today. I felt Good! It's about time I give in to laughter and remember what made me happy as a child, and then go out and get some of that same innocent joy back in my life.

Can I Take the Wall Down?

It's about time I give in to laughter and remember what made me happy as a child.



Patricia Battles

This week I plan to make a chart about needing my boundaries. I now understand that I have not reached a point where I totally feel comfortable with myself. I have worked hard to forget about negative things, yet I feel like by letting go of the negative things I am taking a piece of myself away.

I want people to know and understand that this is who I am and I have worked hard to get to this point. But the problem is that now that I am at this point I am scared. In life there are good things, but bad things always seem to follow. It's like I am battling myself for happiness.

Reflecting and Redefining

When I first began the Transitions Workshop I thought I was beginning the new chapter of my new identity. But after a few weeks passed I realized I was nowhere close to ready for a new start. I was in Letting Go, the first stage of a change, on saying goodbye to my negative thoughts and bad memories, and only a little further along on remembering happy memories.

Then I went into complete chaos. I started to become disorganized and unsure if I could finish the Transitions workshop. I had to think about methods to get me organized and keep me motivated about my change. Now, I feel ready to move forward.

It was hard for me to change, but I saw that it was possible. By starting to create a change in the Transitions workshop, I feel empowered to care for myself and seek help and support when needed.

I really want to keep using these tools as a big part of healing and moving on to bigger, better things in the future. Every time I take a positive step towards making change in my life, I will reward myself. And now I have some new happy memories to look back on with a smile. ■

