

# How to battle a broken brain

**MENTAL-HEALTH HERO:** Debbie Sesula was studying psychology, but didn't recognize the signs

Each Monday until May 5, *The Province* will profile this year's recipients of the Courage to Come Back Awards.

This is the 10th year the Coast Mental Health Foundation has honoured those who have inspired others by their ability to overcome great obstacles in their lives.

The six recipients will be saluted at a gala dinner May 8 at Vancouver's Hyatt Regency Hotel.

Today we profile **DEBBIE SESULA**, who is being recognized in the mental-health category.

BY LORA GRINDLAY  
STAFF REPORTER

Twenty years ago, when Debbie Sesula was completing a degree in psychology at the University of B.C., the days began to get difficult. Getting out of bed, brushing her teeth, attending classes: it all became too much.

A bubbly, friendly young woman, Sesula became withdrawn and quiet. Although she was filled with "textbook knowledge" of psychology, she didn't realize she had begun sliding into what would become seven long years of battling psychosis, an obsession to end her life, the compulsion to cut herself, depression and anxiety.

Mental illness had struck Sesula, but she figured she was tired.

"I just attributed it to burnout from university," said Sesula, 48, from her White Rock apartment.

"I had taken abnormal psych, but I didn't put two and two together.

"It was the hopelessness and the helplessness. Feeling totally worthless. Then I started blaming myself for everything."

A trip to Europe failed to make her feel like herself again. It was while she was in Langley Memorial Hospital for treatment following her second suicide attempt that a doctor uttered words she still carries with her.

He said: "This is an illness. It will do you no good to fight it on your own."

Although things became worse for Sesula before they became better, those words made her realize she was ill.

"Having a broken brain is no different from having a broken limb," said Sesula. "You need treatment. You need to take care of yourself."

In the seven years Sesula lived in the throes of mental illness, she attempted suicide time and time again. She entered a psychotic depression, in which cars would tell her to kill herself. She tried various medications that she doesn't believe helped.



Debbie Sesula at home in White Rock with her cat, Cashmere. 'Life isn't a scripted thing. We cross this bridge, we bang into that wall. Life happens,' she says. JASON PAYNE — THE PROVINCE

She was diagnosed with depression, borderline personality disorder and bipolar effective disorder.

When she was psychotic, objects became alive, urging her to kill herself, but, she said: "The craziness was actually better than the depression" — because being disconnected from reality freed her from the turmoil and despair of her crippling depression.

As a last resort, Sesula received electro-convulsive therapy at Surrey Memorial Hospital.

The electric shocks to her brain took away the desire to kill herself, but damaged her memory. She could think more rationally, but the depression had her in a state of constant battle.

Not long after, she resorted to self-harm, cutting herself on her arms and wrists.

"Self-harm became an obsession," she said.

"It showed me that I was real. It alleviated the inner pain. It's that moment of connecting to this real

act that you are doing."

It's difficult to explain the euphoria it provided her and Sesula realizes only those who have participated in the behaviour really understand.

She now understands her motivation was hate.

"I was still thinking I was to blame for all this. Hate for yourself is really what it boils down to," she said.

She finally realized she would cut too deep and die or disfigure herself. "I didn't want to live like this any



more. It was getting ridiculous," she said.

Sesula said her life began to change for the better with a weekend workshop, an "amazing" exercise in interpreting one's own behaviour.

"That was a major turning point," said Sesula, who now works as the peer support program co-ordinator for Fraser South and Vancouver Coastal Health's mental health services.

For two years, she worked with a counsellor trained in reality therapy and says she became responsible for her needs and learned she could change her behaviour.

For two years, she "went broke" to pay for the pricey private counselling. She was on disability benefits at the time, but she persevered.

"You can't put a price on your health. I wanted to take control of the mental illness and not continue letting it control me," she said.

Sesula is now certified in reality therapy and uses it daily in her work. She has not taken medication since 1996 and controls her illness with hard work and strict "self-management." Once a week she has a "me day" and shuts out the world and recharges.

She now knows her limitations, knows when to say no, and is keenly aware of the early warning signs that tell her things are breaking down.

She has a daily maintenance plan, a crisis plan, a personal wellness recovery action plan and says maintaining her health is incredibly hard work.

"There are still things that interfere," she said.

"Life isn't a scripted thing. We cross this bridge, we bang into that wall. Life happens," she said.

"It's amazing the spirit that we — everyone — has. The spirit of our being to conquer, to get through, survive."

Sesula travels, she laughs, she helps those who are a lot like she used to be. And she shares her story to help others.

"I say to people: 'You may feel this hell right now, but how do you know what tomorrow is going to bring?'" she said.

"If I had successfully ended my life, look at all this stuff that I would have missed out on. That's big."

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