Good afternoon, my name is Stacey. Let me introduce myself. I am a Mac alumni. I went to school here for 5 and a half years, graduating with a B.A in Sociology and a B.S.W in Social Work. I graduated from my Master’s of Social Work degree from the University of Toronto in November 2013. I did my M.S.W part-time over 3 years, as I was also working at the same time. I did my last placement for my M.S.W with children and adolescents who were struggling with mental health issues. Also, over the last 7 years I have worked with at-risk and street involved youth at an outreach centre in downtown Hamilton.

I also have a mental illness.

I am going to share my personal story with you today. During parts of my story, I am going to talk about what I feel now looking back on my life, what was helpful and what could have been helpful to my recovery.

I am here today because I want to spread knowledge and awareness about mental health issues and I have always wanted the opportunity to share my story with the hopes that it would help someone. But I knew that I could only do this when I was well, and even though I still have some rough days I am in the best overall health that I have ever been in. I have lived with some form of depression most of my life. When I was 11 years old, I was a pretty unhappy child. I had a difficult childhood that was filled with a lot of pain, confusion and uncertainty. At this time, the self-hatred I had for myself really began to grow, as I felt guilty and responsible for many things that occurred in my life, but I had no words to describe them. Not only did I have difficulties at home, but I had a hard time at school. I went to a small elementary school, with only 8 girls in my class and was often picked on because to them I was the ugliest and fattest girl in the room. As a way to cope, with this and other things, I became obsessed with my weight. I began restricting my food intake and became involved in purging behaviours which helped me feel like I was doing something to stop the bullying I was going to become thin. This served as a major distraction, an always changing goal to chase and most importantly a way to regain the control that was missing in my life.

**Looking back I think it would have been helpful if the teacher’s that witnessed the bullying and the way these 6 girls isolated me from their group, intervened and at least spoke to them and possibly their parents, may be they would of stopped harassing me or maybe it would have reduced the intensity and frequency that it occurred. It is hard to know, if the bullying stopped or was less aggressive, that it would have stopped my eating disorder from occurring. As the eating disorder, was not only related to the incidents that were happening at school, but also in my home and was influenced by things I had experienced in my past.**

Over the next couple years the eating disorder that I had developed became a lot worse. I was engaging in restricting and purging every day. I was also becoming extremely miserable. Nothing in my life, even activities like sports that gave me joy in the past were making me happy. I hated myself and the world that I lived in and I was in so much pain that I didn’t know what to do with. At this time in my life, I didn’t feel like there was anyone I could talk to, so I remained silent. To deal with the emotional pain, I took it out on myself physically. I started cutting and burning myself and although it only brought short term relief to what was to what was long-term pain, it was a release that I desperately needed.

Also at this time, I started high school which was a complete disaster. I was shy, quiet, awkward and definitely didn’t fit in. The few friends I made were hard to keep, because I was always withdrawing from them. Especially during lunch, which was the time when everyone hung out together. My fear of eating in front of others often made me absent from this social event, because if I did eat that day it was alone in one of the bathroom stalls. Also, school became a lot harder, the work was way more difficult and even though I really tired, I could not concentrate and pay attention. My marks compared to elementary school dropped considerably. During this time, my mom started to realize that something was going on with me and when she saw the cuts on my arms, that I was always trying to hide, she brought me to my family doctor right away. He explained my cutting behaviour as a cry for attention and did nothing to help me that day, but when my mom brought me back a month later because the cutting was not improving and she began to notice that my eating was deteriorating he decided to refer me to the teen clinic at a local hospital. I met with a team of doctors, a psychiatrist, a social worker and a dietician. After these series of assessments I was diagnosed with major depression disorder and an eating disorder. I was put on an anti-depressant right away, placed in an eating disorder group and was monitored regularly by the team. The medication really didn’t help and the eating disorder group that was suppose educate me on how this illness worked, as well as the health problems that it caused and how to overcome it wasn’t very helpful either. Looking back at the group and the information that it delivered was actually very good. It was me that was the problem. I didn’t believe that my eating was distorted and at that time I was having few health issues, so I did not use any of the information to help myself and I pretty much ignored what I was being taught. However, one really important thing happened at that teen clinic that would help for the rest of my adolescents. I met a doctor that I liked and eventually came to trust. She would become my new my family doctor and would turn out be someone who gave me constant support and would help me in any way that she could.

I somehow survived grade 9. However, grade 10 ended up being very different, as this was the year everything in my life seemed to fall apart. First, the eating disorder that I thought gave me control was taking control of me. I had many rules regarding food such as which foods were safe and which ones were bad. If I ate, I ate alone and when I did eat, which was very little at this time, I often threw it up. Because of my strict eating behaviours I started to lose weight very rapidly and eventually reached very low and dangerous number. As a result, my health was extremely compromised by the eating disorder. I started losing my hair, got several sores in my mouth, was dizzy and fainted often and many of my electrolytes were out of balance. To add to this, my depression was the worst it had been up to this point in my life. I would cry every evening alone in my room and felt extreme sadness throughout the day. I also got to the point where I felt life wasn’t worth living any more. I became extremely self-destructive in almost every way. I continued with the burning and the cutting but I did it more frequently than before and caused greater damage. I also became obsessed with death. To me life was too painful to continue living and I had myself convinced that the people in my life would be better off without me because I only caused them pain and I felt like I was a burden. At first, I wrote about the ways I would kill myself in my journal, but as things seemed to get worse I started acting on them. I ended up having two very serious suicide attempts that landed me in hospital. Over the next year I would have 3 admissions to the hospital that were each 2 months in length and because of my age I spent these hospitalizations on a paediatric ward. They tired changing the medication I was on, along with regular appointments with the doctor I mentioned earlier, to help improve my mood. I think the counselling was needed as there were so many things stored up in me that I could never talk about before. Although, talking about these things gave me some kind of release and the feeling that I no longer had to carry them alone, they also made me feel sadder as I had opened up a part of my life that I been suppressing for so long. I did not know how to deal with these issues that I had brought to the surface, which just added to the feelings that I could not live anymore. Since my mood continued to decline rapidly and the professionals that worked with me felt that I could not get the kind of intense help I needed on a paediatric ward they referred me to a treatment centre in Toronto.

**During this time in my life, a resource that was very helpful outside of the medical support I was receiving was Kids Help Phone. There were a lot of issues that I was dealing with that were difficult to talk about with the medical professionals in my life. Whereas, I felt safer talking to a counsellor on Kids Help Phone, as I knew it was anonymous and I found the individuals that I was talking to be supportive and helpful.**

**A resource that would have been helpful, but was not available at that time would have been to be admitted to adolescent mental health unit. Although, I was working with doctor’s, social workers, a psychiatrist and a dietician. The nursing team was not really sure how to help me or how to deal with my maladaptive coping strategies. Also, there were no treatment groups that I could attend and even though there was a recreation therapist on the floor, the activities available were more suited to children and not really for adolescents.**

Once transferred to the treatment centre, I was placed in a group home with other teenagers that had various mental health issues. In the house itself, there was daily group therapy as well as one on one support. I also had regular visits with my family doctor, a social worker and a psychiatrist that worked out of the head office. It was extremely difficult for me at first, being around all these new people. I had to learn to learn live with 5 other people, all who were struggling with their own issues and a fairly large staff team that wanted me to talk about my difficulties with them. But it took time for me to trust these individuals, but when I was able to, that’s when things started to get better for me. I talked to them about the overwhelming sadness that I was experiencing, that affected every aspect of my life. As well as, this pain that I was feeling, that felt uncontrollable and seemed to consume me most of the time. I was also able to talk about the other physical things that were making it very difficult for me to function. I had great problems with sleeping, I had no appetite which just made my eating disorder even more powerful, no energy and my ability to concentrate and pay attention was extremely limited.

After I had been there a while and the team of staff and professionals that I worked with got a good idea of all the difficulties I was having, they designed a treatment plan for me. This involved another change in medication, learning about depression and how it affects people as well as developing new coping strategies. The medication helped somewhat, but I think it was the other things they put in place that made a bigger difference. Firstly, learning that the symptoms I was experiencing were a part of the illness, brought great relief to me. As I always believed I was experiencing these things because there was something wrong with me. Also, the new coping strategies that I learned were invaluable, as they helped me change most of my destructive behaviour and I was able to replace it with more positive actions. For example, the staff helped me make a list of positive coping strategies that included writing in my journal, going for walks, talking with staff, friends and family members and becoming more involved in things that I enjoyed like sports. When I was feeling really bad, I would go through each item on the list until I felt better, sometimes I had to go through the list many times before I felt relief, but most of the time it worked. I was able to stop my cutting and burning behaviours and although the eating disorder remained a part of my life, it didn’t have the control it once did and I wasn’t engaging in the purging and restricting behaviours as frequently. At this point in my life, I would not describe my mood as happy, but it definitely had improved, so had my sleep and my ability to focus and concentrate. These changes helped me function better in school and life in general. In school, I was able to not only pass all my classes (which I was not able to do the year before), but my marks improved substantially. After a year and half at the treatment centre, I moved back home with my parents and returned to my original high school for grade 12.

 Intergrading back into my old high school was difficult as well, as I really didn’t make any friends when I was there before. But now that I was feeling better, I was able to interact more and eventually made friendships with people in my grade. I also became involved in sports teams again and did well in my classes. For the first time in my high school career I received honours in grade 12 and would also achieve this in my OAC year. My ability to focus and concentrate better helped raise my grades, which lead me to getting accepted into all three universities that I applied to.

I decided to go to McMaster University as I knew in high school that I wanted to do social work and I had heard that they had a great program. I knew starting university, in order to get into the social work program that I wanted to be a part of I needed to do well in my first year classes as well as on the entrance exam to get accepted for the following year. So my focus was completely on school as well as work. I got a job at a grocery store, which I needed as I was responsible for paying for the majority of my school and living expenses. In terms of my mental health I felt okay, but I wasn’t really being followed by any doctor’s at the time, so I felt that I had to deal with the issues that arose on my own. I was still struggling with my eating disorder and I engaged in the behaviours more frequently when I was stressed. Also, because I didn’t really know anyone in Hamilton, I felt I had to keep my difficulties a secret. On one hand I felt that I had a new start with nobody knowing about my past, but on the other I felt alone again.

My first year went well as I did well academically and was accepted into the social work program. The next couple of years would be challenging though. In both my 2nd and 3rd year of university my living situation was very difficult. It got to the point where I would spend as much time as possible away from my house, so I would not have to deal with the person that was causing me stress. My living situation was not only causing me stress, but extreme anxiety. Even though I tried to avoid contact by being away from the house as much as possible, there were still incidents where one of the individual’s that I was living with in particular, made me feel as uncomfortable as she possible could. She was always screaming at me and calling me horrible names. It came to the point that every time I entered the house I would experience extreme anxiety (which I now know are panic attacks), my heart would pound, I had a hard time breathing, my hands would sweat and I would feel like I was going to pass out. The overall anxiety that I was experiencing affected my sleep and my ability to focus and concentrate. All of this, plus a demanding school and work schedule started to really affect my mood. I was starting to experience more days that were filled with sadness and started to rely more on my old coping patterns of purging and restricting my food as a way to cope.

Even though I was able to move out of that living situation and found a better one to live in I felt myself slipping back into major depression and still experiencing severe anxiety, so I went to the student health clinic at school and found myself a new doctor. She changed my medication, but it didn’t really help as I continued to sink. I ended up having to drop some classes over the next couple of years. So in total it took me 5 and a half years to finish my B.A in Sociology and B.S.W in Social Work. Over the last couple of years of my degree I became really sick. Along with the doctor, I started to see a psychiatrist and a therapist as well was involved in group therapy. Over this time I had several medication changes and some didn’t work at all and others only worked for a short period. Even though the medications didn’t really help to improve my mood or clam my anxiety, I still felt all the side effects. Depending on the medication I experienced dry mouth, headaches, dizziness, shaking in my hands and limited muscle movement. After I finished my degree, similar to when I was a teenager everything was falling apart and I had gave up hope that anything would help it become better, after all, all the medication I had been on so far had failed me. My eating disorder was so bad my weight had dropped down to a dangerous number again and my health was being compromised by the purging and restricting I was involved in. Further, my mood was so low that all I could do where things that were self-destructive, I began binge drinking and starting cutting and burning myself again. Unlike when I was younger this time I did not want to end my life, but began to believe that this would be the only way for the pain to stop. Once my doctors realized all the maladaptive behaviours I was involved in and felt they could not treat me as an out-patient anymore, I was admitted to an adult psychiatric ward in Hamilton.

**The mental health team that I worked with at McMaster University were excellent. The family doctor, psychologist and psychiatrist supported me in any way they could and believed in me and my ability to get better. They stayed with me during my hospitalizations and continued to treat me until I left the university.**

After reviewing all the past medications I had been on and my non-response to them, the inpatient psychiatrist said my body was medication resistant and suggested ECT (Electro Compulsive Treatment). Many decades ago this type of treatment was known as shock therapy and had a very negative impact on the individuals that received it. The treatment had major effects on the brain and was often given in a crude manner. I found out after I began ECT treatment that both my grandmothers had this type of treatment back then as they suffered from mental health issues as well. I was desperate to feel better, so I agreed to have ECT done. Believe me this type of treatment is very different than it originally was. The purpose of it is through a mild electric shock it creates a seizure that moves around the neo transmitters and chemicals in the brain. Both muscle relaxants and general aesthetic are administered before the treatment is given. The side effects are headaches after the procedure and short-term memory loss, which varies depending on the amount of treatments one has. I originally did 12 sessions in 6 weeks and for the first time in a long time I actually felt better. My mood was greatly improved and as a result I didn’t feel the need to use most of my negative coping skills. After being discharged from hospital I graduated from university and as graduate presents from my family I went to Nova Scotia and then B.C to visit family members. Things were going really well until something horrible happened to me and I also went back to work too soon, which added to my stress load and I ended up relapsing and being re-admitted to hospital 5 months after I was originally discharged.

Since ECT worked the first time my in-patient psychiatrist decided that it would be the best treatment to administer again. This time it didn’t work as well and although I was discharged from hospital I was still struggling. So the decision to counter my poor mood was to do maintenance ECT along with medication. This type of ECT is done as an outpatient and is usually administered once every week or every other week. Unfortunately, maintenance ECT wasn’t helpful either. But by the time the doctors decided to stop treatment I had approximately 40 treatments which is definitely not the norm. My short-term memory really suffered. I don’t remember much of what happened that year and had to rely on others to remind about things that occurred. With ECT as I said earlier there is short-term memory loss, but usually in a year most of it comes back and continues to get stronger after time passes. But for me, since I had so many treatments, although my memory is not as bad as it was that first year, I still have a lot of problems with it. I have great trouble concentrating for periods of time and details and facts of my daily life I still forget and unless I write things down I wouldn’t remember much. Lately bigger details seem easier to remember, but it is still a struggle. When the ECT was stopped I was admitted into hospital again where they would change the majority of medication and put me on a “cocktail” which is a number of different medications. This would finally be the combination that worked, my mood improved quite significantly over the 2 months I was in hospital and would continue to get better after I was discharged. Also work with my therapist helped me to develop new positive coping skills which would help me to not only stop the burning and cutting behaviours, but after my year 15 battle with my eating disorder I was finally able to stop engaging in the purging and restricting behaviours.

**It would have been helpful for me to get a second opinion regarding the ECT from another psychiatrist, especially regarding the second and third treatments. At this point in my life, I was so desperate to get better I was willing to do anything. As a result, I was not able to ask more questions about the long-term outcome of having so many treatments and did not attempt to try to stop treatments when they were not working. It would also been helpful, to have an advocate that understood my mental health problems and could have asked these questions on my behalf.**

Over the last 7 years, my life has improved significantly. Even though I still have difficult days and continue to suffer from insomnia my mood is the most stable it has ever been. I have rejoined the land of the living. Life is fun again, I have friends, a better connection with my family, I have a niece and nephew who I absolutely love and give me great joy and I am involved in many activities that I enjoy. I graduated from the M.S.W program in November 2013, which at times seemed like it would never end and took everything I had to get through. However, I am very proud of myself for finishing this degree and now I am also registered with College of Social Workers, so I can finally officially call myself a social worker! During my clinical placement, I realized that I want to work with adolescents who have mental health issues, in my future career as a social worker. Also, through volunteering and now employment I have found the population that I am most passionate about and feel most able to connect with and that is working with at-risk youth. Also, recently I have continued to meet two big mild stones for myself. This year I reached my seventh anniversary of being in recovery from my eating disorder and I have also been hospital free for 7 years. Although, my life has been extremely difficult at times and it took me a long time to get where I am now, I believe it has made me a stronger person and more understanding of other people’s needs.