


STOPPED IN MY TRACKS

Assistant superintendent Nate Jordan gives a no-holds-barred account of his recent battle with depression, and offers hope to his industry colleagues who are lost in the same darkness.

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As assistant golf course superintendents we have all learned invaluable agronomic knowledge and techniques from our industry mentors. On the other hand, I think it is safe to say that they have also taught us many life lessons. In 2007, the superintendent I was working for shared this with me. He said, "Nate...there are three things that are important in life: your health, your family's health, and the third thing can be whatever you choose, but without the first two you can't have the third."

That statement never had more meaning to me than in the spring of 2011.

After a three-month period of unemployment I was scheduled to start my new position in Ohio as assistant superintendent. There was something missing though; I wasn't excited about it. I was scared, fearful, and doubtful of my skills, knowledge and ability. How was this possible? I earned this position after several months of interviewing, and just came from working as an assistant for three years at a high-end club in Colorado. My mind and body weren't working right, something was wrong, yet I didn't know what the problem was. After experiencing the emotional symptoms described above, as well as extreme fatigue and occasional headaches, I scheduled an appointment with my family doctor. In the brief, 15-minute appointment I had with the doctor I shared with him my problems and he referred me to a psychologist.

After several sessions with the psycholo-

gist it seemed like I was improving, but with 20/20 hindsight I wasn't. By this time I was several weeks in to my new job. Each day was a struggle. Just having the energy to get out of bed in the morning was a challenge. While at work I found it difficult to concentrate, remember and comprehend new information. Even routine tasks that we've all completed around the golf course maintenance facility were cumbersome. Day after day, I came home feeling defeated and empty. My emotions were running frantically and I had uncontrollable thoughts. Those thoughts were mostly negative and consisted of things such as, "I'll never reach my goals, how did I make it this far, and I'm not as good as I used to be." On the outside I looked perfectly normal, but on the inside I was a mess, and that is what made it so challenging.

My condition worsened so badly that I couldn't complete my work and took a leave of absence of several weeks. During my time off I spent three days in the psychiatric ward of the hospital. Prior to this I had never even spent a minute in the hospital, let alone for a condition where I was suffering from extreme mental pain, not physical. Upon admittance I was among a varied crowd of people and received various looks and comments such as, "You don't look like you belong here." One patient even asked me, "Are you a doctor here?" While my appearance and story differed greatly from those around me, guess what, I did belong there. We were all experiencing some form of mental illness and

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needed treatment. Throughout the day we had group sessions which served as a support network during our time of hardship and struggle. One by one, we were called in to meet with the psychiatrist. Finally, it was my turn to meet with the doctor. He reviewed the notes which I had shared with the nurse and then we began to converse further. By the time I left his office I received the diagnosis of major depression and anxiety.

That afternoon I was prescribed an anti-depressant and a second medication to reduce the anxiety I was experiencing. This was one of the most comforting times of life; I finally had an answer and treatment was underway. The remaining two days of my stay consisted of individual and group sessions which served as a time for learning about the illness I was experiencing. Like any illness there are symptoms, and the feelings I was experiencing were merely symptoms of the disease and didn’t define me as a person. I still had all of the skills and potential as I did before. The staff of the Mayo Clinic defines depression as: “A medical illness that involves the mind and body. Also called major depression, major depressive disorder and clinical depression, it affects how you feel, think and behave.

Depression can lead to a variety of emotional and physical problems. You may have trouble doing normal day-to-day

activities, and depression may make you feel as if life isn’t worth living. More than just a bout of the blues, depression isn’t a weakness, nor is it something that you can simply “snap out” of. Depression is a chronic illness that usually requires long-term treatment, like diabetes or high blood pressure. But don’t get discouraged. Most people with depression feel better with medication, psychological counseling or other treatment.” Upon discharge from the hospital I had several prescriptions in hand,

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follow-up appointments with the doctor scheduled, and was instructed that it would be a while before I could return to work.

After arriving at home from the hospital I was welcomed by my family who was grateful for the treatment I received as my personal time of suffering was as equally difficult for them to endure too. One thing was clear. The road to full recovery was going to take time. Anti-depressants

take weeks to begin working, and not everyone responds the same to each medication. It may take several attempts by the doctor to arrive at one that helps achieve the desired results. During the time I was at home, away from work, I began keeping a list of all of the tasks I completed throughout the day. It didn’t matter how simple of a job it was, it went on the list. From just waking up at a reasonable hour, to taking a shower, and brushing my teeth, it went on the list. Because each task required so much effort it was quite fulfilling for me to review the list at the end of the day.

After about two weeks I met with my employer to set-up a modified work schedule as prescribed by my doctor. Thankful for the flexibility and understanding I received, I was able to resume my job working limited hours and days each week. Beyond that, the job tasks which I became responsible for were ones that didn’t require extensive thought or accuracy. My mind was still racing with thoughts and

my ability to focus was limited. Henceforth, working the limited hours, and getting through the day was another stepping stone to my recovery. This continued for about a month and then I was permitted by my doctor to begin working 8-hour days, four days a week. This was an increase from my 6-hour shifts. Once again, during a time of hardship these small gains felt like a victory at the Masters! As the summer

continued and the days got hotter my health continued to improve. It was ideal timing that my doctor gave me the release to work full days, without restrictions, when he did, because all hands were needed on deck for afternoon syringing of the greens. By about the middle of the summer I was feeling more like myself and my mind and body began to function like I remembered. I began to regain the passion and interest I always had for my career, my mind no longer felt like it was filled with cob webs, and my emotions were more stable. It was easier to get up in the morning, I began socializing with friends and family more easily, and life finally felt worth living again.

While this story of my struggle with a mental illness may sound amazingly similar to one told by someone you know or love, I felt it was important to share it with my industry colleagues who could potentially experience a similar situation. Knowledge is power, and just like being able to recognize the onset of a turfgrass disease, the sooner it can be treated the more favorable the outcomes. Nearly a year after I began feeling the symptoms of an illness that turned out to be the most difficult time of my life thus far, I can confidently say I’m back to feeling 100 percent health and have grown and matured in ways I never imagined.

I encourage you to contact me (ntjordan@gmail.com) with any questions you may have concerning my personal experience with depression, and I would be delighted to offer support to any one of you who may be going through a similar situation. With the help of trained professionals, friends, family, and colleagues this disease is one that can be beat and I am here to help. **GCI**

Nate Jordan is an assistant superintendent at Kennsington Golf Club, Canfield, Ohio, and a frequent GCI contributor.