

Psychiatric Times.

The Road To Recovery: Marsha Linehan's Inspiring Example

By Allen Francis, MD | June 23, 2011

Marsha Linehan is the creator of Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) -- the best available method for helping self destructive people help themselves. Having known Marsha for 35 years-- as friend, collaborator, clinical innovator, and psychotherapy researcher, I have always had the deepest affection for her as a person and the highest esteem for her as a professional. But I have never been more admiring of her than I am at this moment.

In today's *New York Times*, Marsha tells the dramatic story of her struggles to tame her own inner demons. During her teen years and early adulthood, Marsha was herself swamped by self-loathing and self-destructiveness. She was hospitalized for more than 2 years; repeatedly burnt, cut, and head banged; made suicide attempts; spent a fair amount of time in seclusion; had shock treatments, and was discharged uncured.

Marsha then found her own way to self cure-- a healing of her mind and a rebirth of her spirit. She acquired a piercing insight that changed both her inner and her outer worlds. Marsha realized that she radically (and without blinking) had to accept herself just as she then was, but equally that she had to radically change herself in all sorts of different and difficult ways. This seemingly paradoxical dialectic of acceptance combined with commitment to change led Marsha out of her depths. She went back to school determined to acquire the tools to help others find their own way out of personal hell.

And provide help and hope she certainly has-- for millions of people who otherwise would have felt compelled to continue hurting themselves-- physically, psychologically, and interpersonally. There have been only 2 really influential clinical innovators in the past half century: Tim Beck (who developed Cognitive Behavior therapy) and Marsha. DBT is the culmination of all Marsha learned from her own suffering, from her clinical training, and from her subsequent clinical and spiritual experiences.

Marsha was not content in curing herself or just a few people. She felt driven to use her special insights and empathy in tirelessly teaching as many therapists and treating as many patients as possible. The toughest challenge for any therapist is the self destructive patient who seems intent on defeating any possibility of benefit from the therapy. Marsha taught therapists how to accept their patients and at the same time how to help them find in themselves the strength to make desperately needed changes.

Marsha is a charismatic person. Early on, it was clear that she personally, and those working closely with her, could achieve seeming wonders with people who were previously thought to be beyond hope

or help. But the question then was whether Marsha's approach depended on her own seemingly magical skills or if it could be applied by the rest of us who lacked her special experiences and personal magnetism.

Fortunately, time has shown that DBT travels surprisingly. Marsha has been tireless in spreading the DBT approach and in scientifically studying its impact. In books, papers, and perhaps most of all in countless workshops and training sessions, she has developed an international network of DBT therapists and clinical programs that bring hope to the previously hopeless.

Marsha chose this moment to share the most intimate and painful details of her life story because she decided she did not want to die a coward. Her courage will be rewarded. She has done a great good that surely will touch many lives.

What a wondrous adventure Marsha's life has been. In myths the world over, heroes must first journey to the Underworld in order to return with the secret of life. Marsha's life was cursed early, but has been blessed since. So thanks, Marsha for being you and for letting us share the gift of wisdom you brought back.