Josie's Story

I started seeing a therapist at MaineHealth Behavioral Health when a deep-seated fear that I carried nearly my whole life could no longer be suppressed in the face of world events. At the same time, a change was made in my anti-depressant medication, which contributed to the crisis. I have a long history of chronic depression, but this time it flared to clinical levels. I requested a therapist as well as an appointment with a psychiatrist who could manage my medication. The psychiatry appointment took a while but was ultimately very helpful.

Meanwhile, I was able to begin seeing a therapist in Belfast—Nick Cullen. From the beginning, Nick provided a warm, supportive and insightful experience. I felt immediate confidence in his professionalism. Over time, we worked---and continue to work----on a combination of everyday needs and underlying issues. On a functional level, Nick helped me take that first step to begin to exercise at the Y, and that continues to be a big part of my routine. He is helping me deal with emotional eating habits and fear of travel. Most importantly, I am learning better ways to manage my fears and anxieties---not by hiding and denying my feelings, but by acknowledging, talking about, and accepting them. I now practice consciously experiencing these difficult emotions in a body/mind space that exists inside me. I have found access to another body/mind space too—one that is spacious and peaceful. Becoming aware of this space has helped me be more patient and kind to others and to myself.

Nick has helped me make connections to some significant early life circumstances. Just 11 months before I was born my parents lost twin babies. I was their "replacement" baby, born so soon after this tragedy because they were advised to have another child as soon as possible and forget the twins. This was in 1947---I think today the advice would have been different. My parents' unacknowledged grief influenced my childhood in many ways. One concerned a deep and pervasive fear that I developed, but I learned early on that it was not acceptable to share it with my mother and father. Consequently, I carried this fear for decades, until one day it could not be suppressed any longer. I also experienced great shame around being a "spoiled" only child. Even as an adult I hid that fact as much as possible. One day in therapy, Nick said to me "You're not really an only

child—you are the surviving child of a family of three children." I was literally speechless when he said this. I had never thought of it this way, and it not only relieved my feelings of shame, it led me to begin a search for any information I could find out about my twin siblings. All I knew was their birth year. It took me a solid nine months to pry their birth and death certificates out of the District of Columbia Vital Records office---a story in itself--- but I finally succeeded. One surreal requirement of the process was that I had to name my own brother and sister, who died before I was born. It felt like closure for me to be able to acknowledge the short lives of my siblings and to learn some of the details that my parents never talked about. Nick was extremely supportive of this effort and really understood what it meant to me.

It has taken lots of time and support for me to begin to understand the origins of ingrained thoughts and behaviors that I had for more than 70 years, and to strategize and practice healthier responses. I feel like I entered therapy seeking relief from a miserable depression, just wanting to "return" to how I felt before, but that is not quite what happened. I am certainly in a much better mental state today, but it is a different state. I feel like I am in a new, quite unanticipated place where, with Nick's help, I am practicing and integrating whole new ways of managing emotional and physical stressors, including the challenges of aging. Working with Nick has been fundamental to my life today, and I'm very grateful for the opportunity. I think that with the right help, what starts as a very painful event can sometimes lead to unexpected positive outcomes.

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