



Sharing my mental health journey to help others

BY STEVEN MICHELMAN

If you are struggling, know there are people and resources available to help.

THE FOLLOWING CONTAINS EXPLICIT LANGUAGE about mental health and suicide. If you are thinking about suicide, please reach out to a friend, family member, doctor, counselor, therapist, or call the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline at 988. You can also search 988 online to easily get to the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline site and have an online chat with someone.

About a month before I spoke about my mental health journey at LDI, I wondered what intimate room the LDI stage, where I would be presenting, was located. My anxiety kicked in when I saw the floor plan showing the stage on the show floor and next to the bar. For months, I had visions of a relaxed, quiet, and safe space. *Instead*, we would be on the noisy, vibrant show floor. People drinking at the bar, walking by, having conversations. I now felt that my words would be less important, less powerful. I would be a joke, a punchline, and not taken seriously. The myths of poor mental health would turn against me and come true. I felt stuck, discouraged, and depleted. I immediately wrote to Lori Rubinstein, Executive Director of Behind the Scenes (BTS), who had asked me to speak. She put no pressure on me, offered support, and gave me the opportunity to change my mind.

The work I have done on my mental health challenges has given me the tools I need to acknowledge and have awareness about my reactions to situations, whether stressful or exciting. I accepted that no matter where I tell my story, helping or reaching just one person is worth it, and speaking at LDI was worth it.

Lori and I had an engaged and supportive audience. Lights were flashing, the bar was busy, people were talking, and a band played 50 yards away. None of that mattered. I was happy, content, and thankful I was still here to share my story.

There are too many myths and a terrible stigma that comes with mental health challenges. I hope what I share here, like my

presentation at LDI, will help someone struggling with these issues or in crisis. If I can enlighten just one person who has a hard time understanding or accepting those with poor mental health, allowing myself to be vulnerable will be worth it. Like any illness, those that are suffering require intervention and support. There are many people in our industry and in our lives who are dealing with depression, bullying, addiction, anxiety, and trauma.

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Design, production, and manufacturing companies in entertainment are slow to respond to Behind the Scenes' call-to-action to support mental health in the workplace. Even though it's a cliché, we live the mantra, "The show must go on!" Deadlines get shorter, material procurement times get longer, prices keep going up, and "Opening Night" is always looming and never relenting. We work in a tough, competitive, and demanding business where mental health challenges impact technicians, artists, managers, business owners, and our clients.

I have had mental health challenges most of my life. Even though I have been seeing a therapist for the past three years, my focus on healing has only been in the past six months. I struggle with anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation. Suicidal ideation is thinking about suicide whether attempting it or not. I had never heard that term

until I was in treatment for it.

Twelve years ago, at age 41, I had a heart attack. An angiogram revealed a 99% blockage in my LAD artery, also known as “The Widow Maker.” I needed three stents. High blood pressure, high cholesterol, and stress contributed to my heart attack. I almost died; then I had to get back to work. I was prescribed medication for cholesterol, blood pressure, and stress. I never took the stress meds. I thought those were for people who can’t fix their own problems. I never considered a heart attack could impact my mental health. Apparently, almost dying is a trauma. My doctor recommended a therapist. I stopped going after four weeks. I didn’t want help. I had taken too much time off and needed to get back to work.

My work/life balance was way out of balance. I continued to work as much, took minimal time for myself and my family, and journeyed on. With my new cardiologist’s guidance, I started jogging and did that for a few years. I felt happy when I ran and loved all of the mental and physical health benefits. About three years in, I hurt my Achilles and stopped running. I never went back. My self-care became bourbon and wishing I would go to sleep and not wake up.

One year ago, I would have made fun of anyone who said, “my journey,” “self-care,” or “work/life balance.” Those words would trigger resentment and anger in me. They meant weakness, excuses, laziness, and failure. They represented needing help. Asking for help was never an option. I lived a life filled with these myths and disseminated them among my family, employees, and my peers. In our company’s vision statement, I put the words ingenious, relentless, veracious, and deliberate at the forefront. I offered no support or self-care to counter those high-pressure words. If you’re not well, not rested, or don’t have the tools to cope with stress, you will not be equipped to effectively help others. I can imagine business owners, like me, saying, “We have a business to run and clients to manage!” That is true. Providing good solutions, showing clients they are a priority, being honest, and making decisions without wavering are important to grow and be successful. It is possible to be successful and give our employees and ourselves the time needed for self-care.

During the summer of 2019, my passive ideation became active. I was now making plans. Plans would come as reactions to failures, minor or major. Anger, disappointment, frustration, all taken out on myself. I was under enormous pressure from unattainable expectations I set for myself. I did not have the skills or tools to cope or be resilient. People saw a guy who had it all together. On the inside, I was suffering. I never celebrated successes. I focused on what went wrong and where I made mistakes. A call from a client, a problem in the shop, a misspelling—big or small, they all pushed me further into a dark place.

My plans became actions, and I made my first attempt. It was not the last. Eventually I told my wife. She found a therapist who specialized in suicidal ideation. I saw her once a week. Therapy immediately helped. Like when I took antibiotics; I was feeling better right away. So, I went every other week and then every three weeks. Like stopping those antibiotics, the effectiveness weakened. Switching to every three weeks, my suicidal ideation increased. I made another attempt. I did not tell anyone. I would later learn, almost too late—it is okay to speak about not being okay, and it is okay to reach out if you are not okay.

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I just needed the quick fix. I felt better and I decreased therapy. I felt worse and increased it. I hid my pain from everyone. I convinced my therapist to continue my sessions in this erratic manner. I was on a continual downward spiral and in a dark place. Suicidal ideation became the healthiest part of my coping. Thoughts of being able to die was all I had for relief. In my mind, I was alone. I got comfort thinking about suicide. I would learn I was not alone.

In November 2021, I just returned from IAAPA to attend LDI. When I landed in Las Vegas, I went to a scheduled therapy appointment. The previous week I spent planning my trip to Orlando. Not a presentation; I was planning my suicide. It was the closest I ever came to dying. I was shaken and scared. I told my therapist and then my wife. Immediately there was a safety plan in place. I could not be left alone. Two weeks later, I stopped working. Neither our employees nor our clients knew what happened. I vanished without explanation.

A few weeks later, I tricked my wife and therapist that I was doing better and needed a little space, more freedom. My wife wanted me to go to a facility. I thought “I’m not that kind of mentally ill. Mental hospitals are for crazy people.” Like with my other myths and fears, I

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would learn the truth and benefits of inpatient treatment.

I started seeing a psychiatrist and taking medication. I tried many different ones, some for anxiety and depression and some for sleep. I expected meds to make everything better. They did not. Not because they aren't effective, they are. I just wanted them to do all the heavy lifting. That is **not** how medication works. I still needed therapy and self-care. I read some books and did a few puzzles. I was still not truthful in therapy. I was not trying to heal. I thought not working was the self-care I needed.

I stopped drinking. I had been using booze for years to help me sleep and escape. After stopping, sleep became difficult. I blamed it on not drinking. Maybe that was a symptom, but the cause was much deeper. I would wake every hour, stare at the clock, fall asleep, and do it again the next hour. This went on night after night for months. My poor sleep continued, and my mental health declined. Healthy sleep is an important part of good mental health.

Five months after my safety plan started (in April 2022), I was in crisis and made another attempt. My wife found a clinic for professionals struggling like me. I checked myself in. As they did with all patients, they took anything I could hurt myself with like belts, shoelaces, prescription medicine. They cut out the strings on my sweats and shorts. No more obsessively checking my phone. They took that, too. I was placed in a suicide prevention room and was not allowed to leave the unit until they felt I was safe. Every 15 minutes a nurse asked me how I was feeling, and did I want to hurt myself? I felt alone and scared.

I met people who were struggling with challenges and traumas that no one should endure. The first person who shared their story with me had made a suicide attempt. It was validating to hear. They didn't want to die; they just didn't know any other way out. I was **not** alone. Getting to talk with someone, and then being able to share my story without judgment was an incredible relief. That one single connection helped me. The peer connections I made were an integral part of my recovery.

I learned my feelings were always intertwined with anxiety and depression. My happiness was counteracted by negative thoughts. Anger and frustration were always exacerbated. Through some major discoveries, I was finally pulling anxiety and depression apart from my other feelings. I now feel happiness and sadness as pure emotions, something I never felt before.

I continue to stay consistent with my treatment, take my medication, exercise when I can, and do things I enjoy. I walk, do yoga, and go outside in the sun, whenever possible. I now sleep through the night, and it makes an enormous difference for my mental health.

I have taken the Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) Course and I am now a facilitator (<http://btshelp.org/mhfa>). BTS has a goal to have one person at every company take the course. Please talk to your employees, supervisors, owners, and try to find one person and the eight hours needed to become a Mental Health First Aider. It is a

minor commitment with a major impact.

A few weeks before LDI, I met with my employees and shared my story. It was the first time they had seen or heard me in about 11 months. I wanted them to learn my story first. When I got to the word "suicide," I paused. I was terrified to say it. I thought about all of those myths and stigma, and how learning I was not alone helped me. I took a deep breath and said the word.

As a business owner, I relate to the difficulty reflecting on how we complete a project, go on to the next, and ensure our team is mentally prepared. Our industry is filled with people who have experienced perpetual burnout and fatigue. People like me who wear their "no time off" and "no sleep" as a badge of honor. Our industry's culture thrives on this model. I have said "sleep when you're dead." too many times. Maybe we can try, "Go home, get some rest, walk your dog, do some laundry, spend time with a loved one, and come back fresh and ready to work hard." This industry and our clients will always push to get it done quicker and cheaper. That will never change. However, we own the narrative of how that happens. We **can** manage expectations and work with our clients to help ensure our employees get the enjoyment out of hard work, achieve impossible goals, and **not** burnout. Acceptance and change takes time, we would be remiss not to acknowledge that fact. We can start making changes today. Take small steps. Do something to impact our culture in positive ways while promoting good mental health industry wide.

Our team has said they feel they are working in a safe space. We have people from our team taking the MHFA class. We support anyone who is interested. We are not heroes. We are taking those small steps; throwing a little pebble into the water and watching the ripples make a difference.

Everyone's mental health journey is different. This is my story. Today, I am mentally and physically healthy, happy, and joyful. Six months ago, I would have laughed after saying those words. Now I wear **that** as a badge of honor. If you want to help others who are struggling with mental health challenges, please consider taking the MHFA course. If you are struggling, know there are people and resources available to help. There is no shame in asking for the help you need. ■



Steven Michelman is owner and founder of EPS (Entertainment Project Services, LLC). Steven wants to take this opportunity to thank his family and friends, especially his wife Molly, for their continued unconditional support. He offers his email, steven@epsolves.com, to anyone navigating their own journey. Please be kind, especially to those struggling.