

*Second Prize Winner Division One (100 level courses)*

## **My Toolbox**

It was a hot summer day in August when I first met Kim. I had previously talked with her on the phone, but was still apprehensive about our first meeting.

Kim worked in a small office building. When I stopped at the reception desk, the girl at the copy machine said Kim would be out in a few minutes. Kim appeared a few minutes later and introduced herself. She was a petite woman, about 5'3" with long sandy blonde hair. Kim's smile and sparkling blue eyes made me feel more comfortable about being there.

Kim's office was down the hall and to the right. The walls were painted a light peach color with a small desk just to the right of the doorway as I entered the room. The office looked like a small living room with a couch, two comfortable looking chairs, two small tables, and two lamps. A large high set window looked out into the parking lot. The blind over the window was pulled down, opened enough to let light in without compromising privacy. The lighting was soft and the room had a cozy, comfortable feeling. Kim asked me to sit wherever I wanted. I chose the couch. She handed me the initial paperwork: a questionnaire about my social history, personal information, insurance information, etc. As I filled out the forms, I cautiously asked some questions that I had for her.

Being at Kim's office was a giant step for me. I had always been self sufficient, self reliant, able to handle all that life had dealt to me. My parents' divorce when I was 8, my alcoholic, abusive stepfather, and drug and alcohol abuse, were just a few of the problems I had faced. My personal motto was "I am a survivor." I had survived a lot.

In the last few years my life had gone through many changes. For various reasons, my husband and I had decided to move our family from California to the southwest where he was from. Life in the southwest was a culture shock for me. I never pictured myself living in the desert. I had always lived in coastal communities up to this point. I love the water; especially the ocean and I miss having it close by. For me, the ocean is a place to go to play, relax and meditate. On a calm day, I could contemplate the vastness of the ocean and the many lives she hides under the surface. At other times, watching her waves hit the shoreline with breathtaking power always helped me refocus and gain my perspective. Going to the ocean was my version of therapy. Now I lived in the desert where the closest body of water was ninety miles away.

Since moving to New Mexico, I had yet to make any “friends”. I met a lot of people through church and work, but all were acquaintances. Other stresses in my life included marriage, economic, and car problems. We had very little money or reliable transportation to go anywhere for the first two years after we relocated here. We had a car that barely got us to work and back, so we couldn’t trust it to leave town. My life seemed to consist of work and home; sleep, wake up and repeat. There seemed to be nothing in between. No real friends, no outside activities. We had two children at the time, so when we wanted to do something, the added cost for a babysitter usually prevented us from taking part. We were slowly building our lives up by making friends and improving our economic situation. But life kept throwing obstacles at us to overcome. I felt like for every step we took forward, life pushed us back two steps.

What was my quality of life at this point? Sure, I had survived, but at what cost? I had become angry. I was angry *all* the time. I felt like my life was one giant mess and I just wanted out. I wanted out of my family, my job, my responsibilities, and my life. Thoughts of suicide occurred more frequently, plans to escape my life filled my thoughts. I was strong enough to take

suicide out as an option for me, but the thoughts still invaded my mind. My performance at work was going down hill and my anger was showing through. I had always been able to separate my life with the working world, but now they were converging. I felt like my marriage was on its way to divorce and I was becoming an abusive parent, yelling at my children most of the time. I was frequently sick with many different problems, most of which my doctor said were caused by stress. My physical health was showing me signs: a stomach ulcer, frequent headaches, muscle stress in my neck, intestinal problems and more. I wasn't reading the signs my body was pointing out to me. False memories were a constant daily battle, trying to entice me back to the 'happy, carefree life' of drugs and alcohol where problems didn't seem to exist.

Finally I made a decision: I didn't want to go backwards in my life. I didn't want to be this angry, mean person I had become. I didn't want to be physically ill and I certainly didn't want to run away and start my life over again. I didn't want to lose what I had worked so hard for in my life. I wanted my marriage to work and I wanted to raise happy healthy children who would feel safe and loved at home. I made covenants with God that I wanted to honor and I wanted to be happy again!

Once I decided what I truly wanted, I had to figure out how to *fix* my problems. I had fixed so many of my problems in years before, but this time was different. I had already tried the different tools I knew how to use. None of them were working. My life was in a downward spiral. The past few years of my life through all the different changes, had depleted my personal resources. This time, I didn't have the tools I needed to fix my life or myself. My toolbox seemed almost empty.

Now I was here in Kim's office, I knew I needed to be here, but that knowledge didn't make it any easier. I had made the appointment a few weeks before, but the decision to ask for

*professional* help, took over a year to make. I had the idea that therapy and mental health counseling were for “sick” people, “mentally disturbed” people. I wasn’t sick, or was I? I was in Kim’s office to find out. Was I normal? Did I just need some *professional* help? Was I mentally ill? Would I need to take “drugs” to correct it? With my history, I didn’t like the thought of taking drugs, *any drugs*, prescribed or not.

After scoring the questionnaire (evaluation) I had just finished filling out, Kim said, “Moderate depression with mild anxiety”. “So, what does that mean, am I mentally ill? Will I need to take drugs”? I asked.

“Oh no, I don’t see sick people, I only see healthy people”, Kim said with a smile.

Kim explained the difference between a licensed therapist - counselor, and a psychiatrist. Kim assured me that if at any time during my therapy she felt I needed to try anti-depressants, she would refer me to someone who was qualified in that area. “I don’t see anything on this evaluation that would indicate a need for drug therapy at this time” she concluded.

I felt relief! I thought, “So I’m healthy. I’m not crazy. I probably won’t need drugs, (at least not right now). This is good. This is progress. I’m glad I came.” On the drive home, after our first session, I concluded aloud to myself: “I made a good decision. This is a good first step toward a solution. I can see the light at the end of the tunnel, it is very small, but it is there. I need new tools to work through this and I feel that Kim is the right person to help me.” A relief came over me, like a heavy weight was lifted off of my shoulders. I smiled all the way home.

I talked to Kim about everything. I told her my frustration at not being able to help myself this time. I told her what a difficult decision it was for me to admit that I needed professional help and my anxiety about drug therapy. Kim gave me tools to work with, simple ones at first. One of them was how to breathe properly to help reduce stress. I thought it very odd

that she would ask me how I breathe. I took a deep breath for her, and my chest expanded. I didn't know that when most people are tense or stressed, they breathe shallow. When you take a *real* deep breath, your stomach area expands. This means that you are getting air down to the bottom of your lungs, filling them, thus creating more oxygen for your body to circulate. I practiced it and it helped.

Another tool she helped me with was how to communicate better, using *I* statements instead of *you* statements. She helped me to realize and accept that I cannot change anyone else I can only change myself. Once I came to accept that concept and decided to embrace it, my life became much more under my control. I practiced controlling *my actions* towards others and *my reactions* to others.

Every problem I brought to her, Kim gave me a tool to try. Most of the tools worked fine after I practiced using them. There were a few times I had to go back and ask for a different tool, because the one I had just didn't fit. Sometimes I had to *practice* them over a longer period of time to be able to use them correctly. Kim helped me find familiar tools I had lost or misplaced along the path of my life and new tools I didn't know existed, along with tools I had read about but didn't know how to use. One such tool was anger management. In the process of trying to fix myself, I read a lot on the subject, but I just couldn't get it under control in a lot of circumstances. It seems we all have 'buttons' that can set us off in an instant, well I had way too many buttons for my liking. I was getting angry at the silliest, stupidest things. Kim helped me find the buttons and then simply said, "Now change them." "How?" I asked. Kim said something along this idea, "You have already started by identifying them. Now work through the anger. It's okay to be angry, it's a human emotion. The key to getting over being angry is letting yourself go through it or work through the anger." "Okay," I thought, "this might work." This is how it the

exercise works: first you identify what you are angry at, is it really because the kitchen counter didn't get wiped off, or is it because your boss took out his anger on you three days ago and you haven't resolved it yet? Are you really mad about what your husband just said to you, which was nothing to take offense at, or are you stressed over your economic problems and just taking it out on him? Once you identify what you are really angry about, then you can work through the anger and let it go. It took many weeks and months to practice using this tool, but once I got familiar with it, it made a huge difference in my life. The anger and the yelling in our home decreased and my husband and my children noticed. Then I noticed what an influence my anger problems had had on my children. After I mastered the tools I was learning, I could then in turn teach my children those same tools and how to use them.

As I expressed every anxiety and problem I had, Kim talked to me like a friend, compassionate, yet always professional. She helped me to see how I could use my tools in different situations. Kim was also a marriage and family counselor, so along the way my family met Kim. My husband and my daughters received tools of their own to help them in their lives as well.

I cried a lot; Kim provided a lot of Kleenex. Kim answered any questions I had for her without hesitation. We became friends and I learned about her life too. Kim had been abused as a child and was a vegetarian. She had been in counseling herself for many years and that experience had helped lead her to her current profession. She told me once, "I wouldn't trust a therapist that hasn't been in therapy themselves." Kim was married and had a 6-month-old daughter, so we talked about marriage, becoming a mom and being a mom, along with many aspects of our lives. I learned Kim did some of her clinical studies in a busy L.A. mental hospital

where she helped very mentally disturbed people. She once commented, “I much prefer helping healthy people, but I’m grateful for the experience.”

Slowly at first, then at a steady pace, my toolbox was filling up. Just a few months ago it was nearly empty. I was excited to have new tools! I was excited that my new tools worked!

During what became our last session together, Kim said, “Why are you here? You are fine. You don’t need to come see me anymore. You have the tools you need to be on your own.”

I responded, “If I ever need help again, I am going to call you”.

“Call me anytime,” Kim responded with a smile.

I was sad and at the same time I was proud of having come to this point, my therapist saying I didn’t need her, that I could stand on my own and I would do just fine. Tears filled my eyes as I said goodbye with a hug and left her office. Tears of joy at having success, mixed with tears of sadness at saying goodbye to a trusted friend.

Since my last session with Kim, I keep my toolbox full by using my tools daily. I am not angry all the time and I am able keep it under control by working through it and by addressing the ‘real’ issues instead of letting them build up to the point of taking it out on innocent people in my life. I have thrown away most of my buttons, and can change them when I need to. Children, especially teenagers, are the very best at finding their parent’s buttons and then constantly pushing them. As a mom, being able to change my buttons is one of my most valuable tools!

The tools I learned to use during my therapy help me in all aspects of my life. Some of them I now use unconsciously, others I can recall without much effort, and still others I need to practice more. Therapy is not what I thought it was before I actually tried it. Therapy is a way for people to get the professional help they need, when they are having problems, to continue on in their life and improve themselves. When I am happy and content within myself, then it shows

through and influences those around me for the better. Just a few weeks ago, a co-worker commented that I am always smiling and happy when she sees me and asked how I do it. I responded, "I have been other ways in my life and I much prefer being happy and smiling."