

SPOTLIGHT ON

OSCAR JIMENEZ-SOLOMON, M.P.H.

Holding Hope for One Another

Oscar Jimenez-Solomon grew up in Peru in a family of business and political leaders, including the first congresswoman, two ministers, a political writer and the first Peruvian scientist in Antarctica. The implicit expectation was that everyone had a gift and was obligated to share it.

"I worked hard since I was a teenager to find my purpose. I excelled academically, and, in college, I started feeling that I was finding my way. But at the age of 22, when I was about to finish college, I had a major breakdown. I started medicating my depression and anxiety with alcohol and other substances. I started seeing a psychiatrist, but I didn't feel that he understood me. He wanted me to stop doing my work and research and go into inpatient treatment for a year. He and my family did not seem to understand what they were asking me to do—to give up my dreams."

Oscar realized his dream of going to graduate school and continuing his research. Although he continued to struggle, he attended school and worked in New York, but he was terrified that he would not do well. He saw a psychiatrist and took medications, but because he was still experiencing symptoms, he returned to alcohol and drugs. After months of this, the psychiatrist told him, "Oscar, I am a psychiatrist, and I have training in the symptoms you are dealing with. But I cannot help you stop abusing substances." The doctor gave him a phone number and said, "These people can help you because I cannot." The number was to a peer support program.

Oscar believes that, "in engagement, a good clinician recognizes his or her limitations. We try hard to keep people connected to us, but the other side of the story is taking a risk to tell people what they need to know to be part of the decision. It is also a way of saying, 'I think highly enough of you to tell you this.' This type of vulnerability is what builds trust."

Oscar called the number and started attending a peer support group.

"One of the things I heard there was that I had to put my recovery first, before everything else. For two years, I went to at least one peer support meeting a day. But every month or two my symptoms would feel like too much and I would turn back to alcohol and other substances. As time passed, I was starting to lose hope. I would think, 'what is wrong with me? Why can't I get sober? I want to, but I can't. There must be something wrong with me.'

Everyone in the peer group was very supportive, but I especially recall a very caring older woman who would say to me time and again, 'please don't stop coming to our group. We will love you until you are able to love yourself.' That support kept me coming back. At the time I was also in individual and group therapy, and I had a psychiatrist, but what kept me engaged was the unconditional love and support I felt from my peer group."

Oscar did very well in graduate school. When he graduated, he was offered a research job, but his depression and anxiety were getting worse. "Really strong internal voices were telling me that I was a loser and worthless, and that I did not deserve to have the job I had," he says. "A year later, I was on a business trip in a foreign country and the self-defeating voices were worse than ever. I felt I had to numb the pain, and I relapsed on alcohol and other substances. I disappeared for two days and lost the research career I had been working toward for 10 years. When that happened, I thought I could no longer live—like a door had been shut forever."

After considering suicide, Oscar was hospitalized for several weeks. He stayed away from New York until his one-year anniversary of being sober, then came back to visit friends and people in the peer group he attended before. "I ran into the caring woman who had been so supportive. She looked at me with love and smiles and said it was wonderful to see me again. She said to me, 'For the two years that you were coming here and sharing with us, I would ask myself, 'Why is it not working for Oscar? But now I see you, alive, in recovery and well, and I ask myself, who am I to say that something is not working for someone else?'"

To Oscar "this is a story about the unpredictability of recovery, and the importance of holding hope for one another. At times, it may not seem that our best efforts are working. It takes great vulnerability to not walk away from those who are struggling." He wonders how we can address on a broader level the basic principles of engagement and services— taking risks, embracing vulnerability and letting go of our need to predict outcomes. He believes that we need options between "you cannot do this for yourself, so we are going to commit you" and "go ahead and kill yourself."

Oscar wasn't willing to go into a hospital, but was willing to show up at a psychiatrist's office. He wasn't willing to stop his studies, but was willing to attend peer support meetings. "Readiness can develop over time. My level of readiness kept advancing, in part because of the growing pain, but also because of the risks many took to keep me engaged."

Oscar Jimenez-Solomon is a research scientist and research coordinator at the New York State Center of Excellence for Cultural Competence at the New York State Psychiatric Institute at Columbia University Medical Center and senior research staff associate at the Columbia University Department of Psychiatry. Oscar is also an Adjunct Instructor at Rutgers University Department of Psychiatric Rehabilitation. He has been sober and in mental health recovery for twelve years.