



## April Peer Perspective

Hello, my name is Shelly Schwanke, and I am a Certified Family Peer Support Specialist. Along with working full-time at CMMHC, I am a mom of 3 boys with special needs and physical and mental health difficulties. I, too, have my own difficulties with physical and mental health.

My journey begins with the desire to be a mom. Of course, just like everyone else, I had the dream of having “normal” children. When my first child was born, I had no idea what was in store for this little person. When my child was 8 (I had my 2 other children already), we found out they had a genetic disorder that affected every aspect of his life, especially his immune system. By this time, all 3 of my children had been diagnosed with depression, anxiety, ADHD, Autism, etc. My own physical and mental health started to decline as well. I felt so alone and blamed myself for not having “normal” children. Eventually, with everything that was happening in my family, I turned to alcohol to cope with the never-ending doctors’ appointments, outpatient therapy, psychiatrists, OT, PT and Speech, IEP meetings, behaviors, etc. For 10 years, I was able to hide my addiction from family, friends, and doctors. I never drank while with friends or family. I was able to function as a “normal person” I graduated from college, worked, and raised my children while drinking every night until I was numb and passed out. I knew I couldn’t keep this up because I would end up drinking myself into an early grave, but I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t want to go to AA because I couldn’t keep my drinking a secret if I did. I was going to therapy but quit because it was “too much” with work and all my children’s appointments.

Three years ago, I ended up in the hospital with emergency surgery (one of many throughout the years). I felt defeated and broken. I thought, “If I die, what will happen to my family, my children. Who will manage all their needs? Who will tuck them in at night? Who will be there to pick them up when they fall?” I knew then something had to change. I never picked up another drink after that. I am coming up on my 3rd anniversary of sobriety, which I also celebrate in private.

Over the last 20 years, I have navigated the mental health system, searched for support and services, and met with county case managers for my children’s needs, all while drinking myself to sleep at night, fighting depression and anxiety. Even though I am married, I still felt alone and like I had no one to talk to. I promised myself that if I ever got the chance, I would be the support person for others who were going through the same thing.

I started working as a Target Case Manager for CMMHC in May of 2021. Last year when the opportunity came up to move over to the Certified Family Peer Support team, I thought, here is my chance to help those navigating the health care and county system while raising children who may have mental health difficulties well. This isn’t my first rodeo with CMMH, as my family and I were clients at one point.

I still have many days where I want to crawl into bed and forget that I even exist. I still have those days when my phone rings, and I want to chuck it across the room because it is one more provider on the other end. I still have many days that I’m so stressed, thirsty, and crave that ice-cold beverage. However, having the opportunity to work with others gets me out of bed in the morning, keeps me from having that drink, and allows me to continue my journey with others. I am no longer alone. We can heal and face our difficulties together.

Shelly

*We are the evidence; We hold the hope.*