The Professional

A MENTAL HEALTH JOURNEY

INSTRUCTIONS

Read the page on the right about the Professional. Then pause. As you move throughout the Mental Health Journey exhibit, you'll see his **"tie"** icon. This will show you his unique experience with each barrier in the exhibit. When instructed, flip to a tab in your booklet to read more.

This narrative is based on the real stories of Wisconsin residents with mental illness. All names have been changed to protect privacy.

My name is James

and I'm 50-years-old. Until recently, my job was the center of my whole life. I started working when I was 14, got a big job right out of college, and have worked my way up the corporate ladder. I've worked for prominent organizations, both public and private, and have managed hundreds of employees.

I'm proud of the work that I've done and the things I've accomplished in my career. It was normal for me to work 60- to 80-hour weeks. While at times it was difficult on my family, I loved being needed at work and making a difference at my organization.

I love numbers and data. My wife always refers to me as the left-brain of the family. I want everything to have a process and a system.

But the further I progressed in my career, the more it seemed like a balancing act. Balancing my job, my relationship with my wife, my family, and my personal health all seemed more than I could handle.

At Work

At my job, I had to be "on" at all times. My different responsibilities required perfection, and my day-to-day work life was extremely demanding.

My depression didn't come along until later in my life, but it came at a time where I was already overwhelmed and overworked. After a long day of work, I'd come home completely drained from not only my job, but from not attending to the despair growing in my mind.

Depression didn't make sense to me. It didn't seem to add up.

When I knew I couldn't perform at one hundred percent, I'd call in sick to work. I didn't want to go in if I knew I wouldn't be able to do a perfect job. I didn't want to talk openly about my mental health at work because it changes your identify forever. It changes how people view you. People will make assumptions about you because of your mental illness.

After enough sick days, my boss and coworkers started to find out about my depression. I immediately felt like there was a target on my back and that they would try and get rid of me.

When issues would come up at work, unrelated to my mental health, I felt like my coworkers would draw conclusions and attribute everything to my condition. Any mistake, moment of silence, or a certain look on my face would cause coworkers to wonder if I was capable of doing my job.

Colleagues started distancing themselves from me personally and professionally. Then calls went unreturned and emails received no reply. The more I reached out for help, the worse it got.
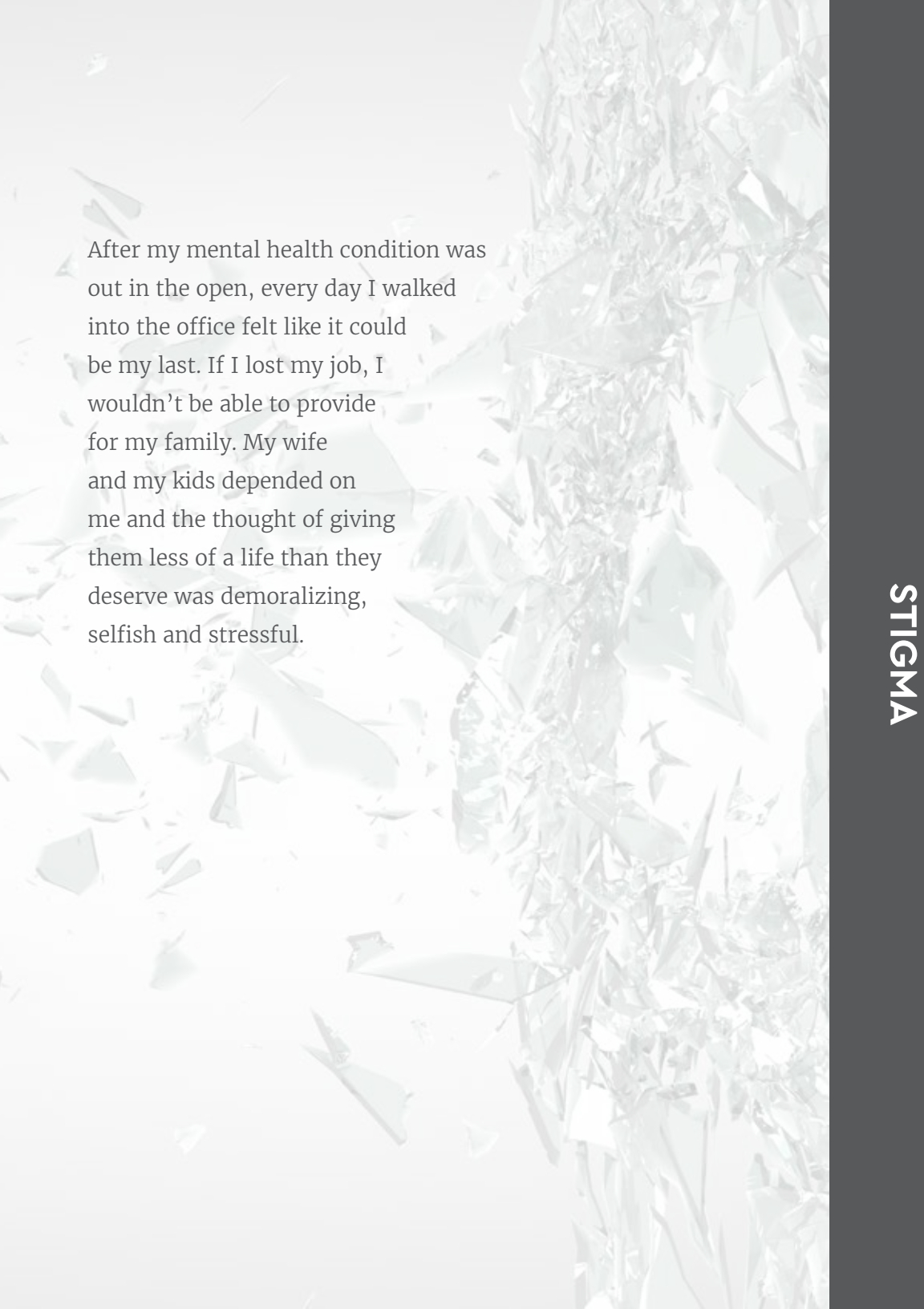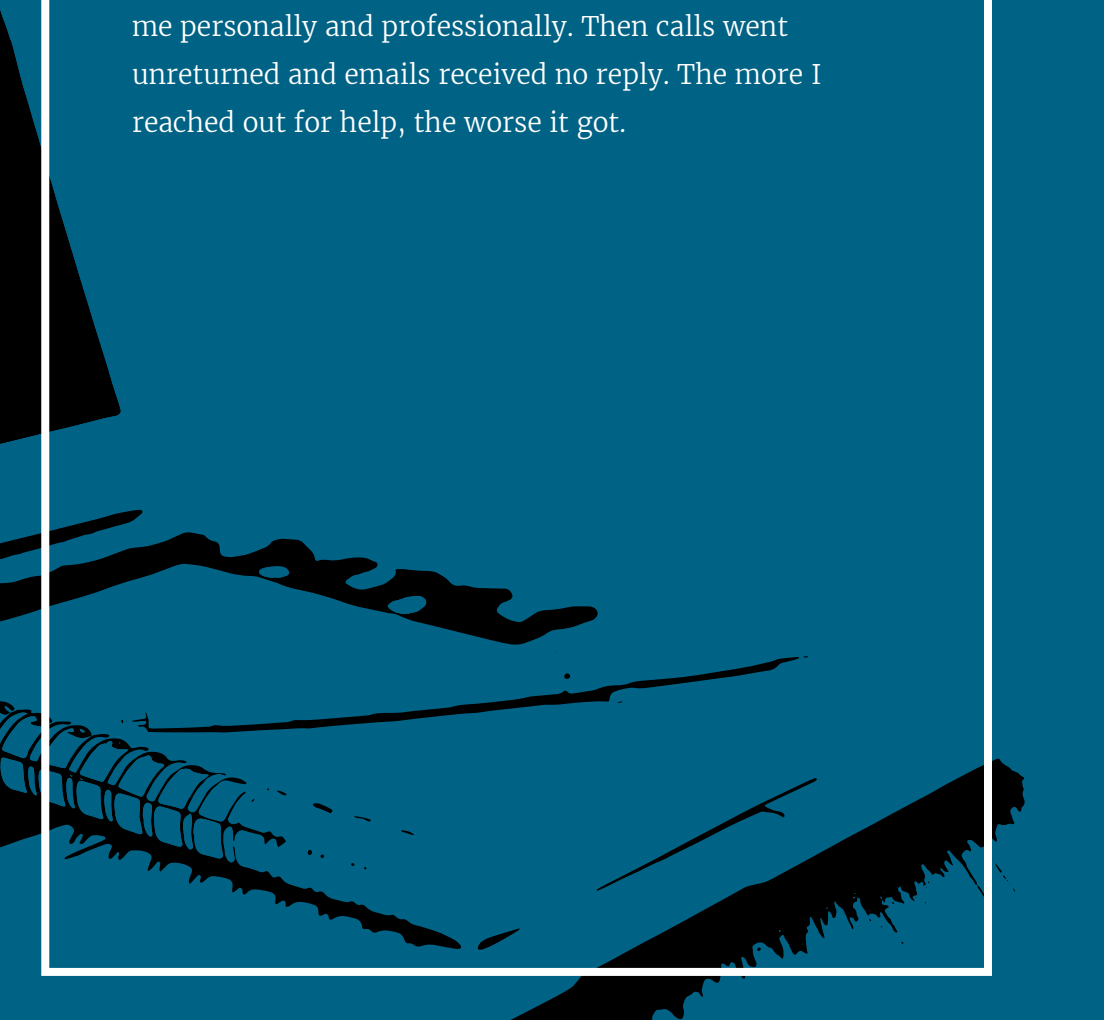
Stigma

At my organization, because of my senior position, I felt like my mental health condition was on display. I felt discouraged from seeking care. I didn't want to take off work for an appointment and didn't want to be seen in the parking lot of a therapist's office. I was embarrassed of coworkers finding out I had depression.

I was scared that if people knew I had depression they would view me as weak or incapable. I thought that leaders and people in charge were immune to feelings like this. I wanted to be the rock of my family and of my company.

I wanted people to feel like they could still count on me. I don't want to be treated differently. I want to be seen as the same, hard-working, committed person that everyone knew and loved.

Once coworkers knew about my mental health condition, I felt like people found ways to avoid me, cut off any conversations with depressive tones, or try to meet any statement I made with a solution. They made me feel like depression is a choice and I'm suffering because of my actions.

After my mental health condition was
out in the open, every day I walked
into the office felt like it could
be my last. If I lost my job, I
wouldn't be able to provide
for my family. My wife
and my kids depended on
me and the thought of giving
them less of a life than they
deserve was demoralizing,
selfish and stressful.

Access

My depression had been getting worse. I had put off getting care for so long, that it finally came down to a moment of truth.

After a particularly long day at work, I stalled going home. I needed something to take the edge off. My daughter had commented that morning that she missed my smile. I desperately wanted to let loose and have fun with my kids like I used to do.

I pulled into the parking lot at the nearby liquor store. My father had been an alcoholic, so I was always aware of the negative effects of drinking. Therefore I had an extremely disciplined life, and I rarely drank. This night was different. I felt like I truly needed alcohol. I thought I could handle it.

This started my real downward spiral. My wife soon recognized the signs. I always told her that winding up like my father was my worst nightmare.

She called an inpatient facility that specialized in alcohol and drug abuse. At the time, I didn't want to go. I grasped at the idea that I was still the father, husband and boss that I wanted to be.

So before I knew it, the police showed up at my door to escort me to the facility. I had no idea what would happen.

My older daughter watched as I was put in the back of a cop car. Her mouth hung open as the car drove away with me inside. I wish I could erase this from her memory.

After inpatient care, I started going to therapy regularly. With my wife's support, I stayed away from alcohol. I'm so grateful I had her there for me.
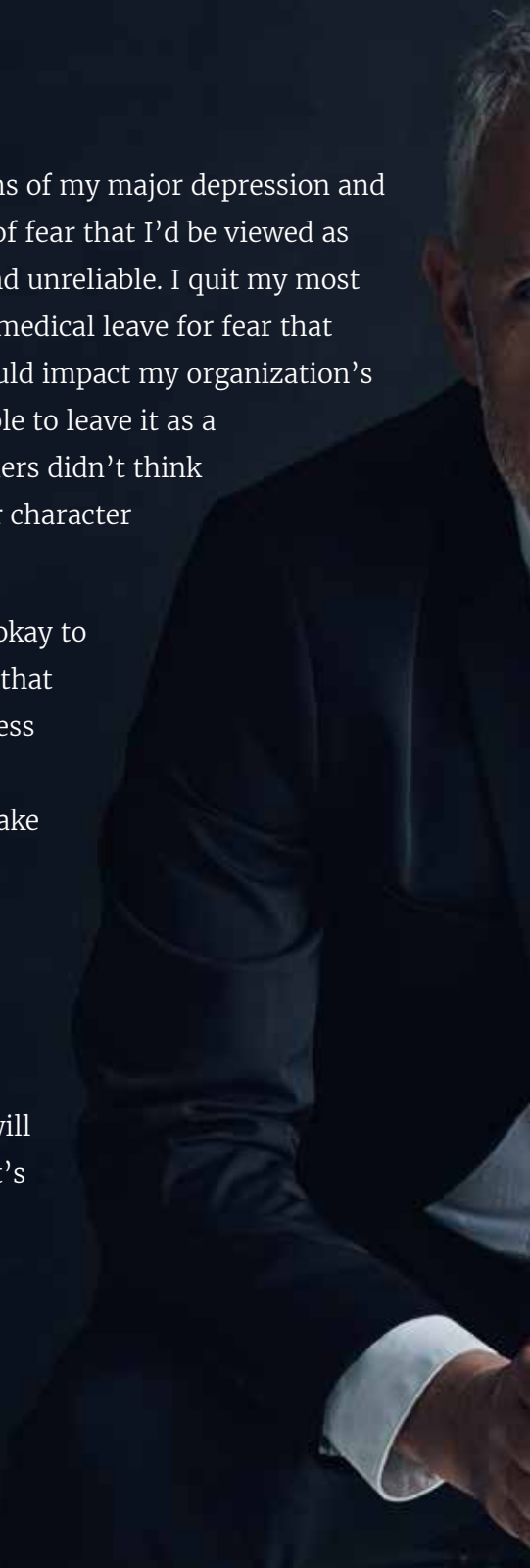
But I still had a ton of stress, anxiety and fear about losing my access to care. I felt so stable when I was going to therapy and getting medication that the thought of losing it seemed unbearable. I constantly worried what would happen if my company switched their insurer or I had to change jobs.

Today

I remained quiet about the depths of my major depression and anxiety to most people because of fear that I'd be viewed as less professionally competent and unreliable. I quit my most recent job rather than apply for medical leave for fear that knowledge of my depression would impact my organization's view of me. It felt more acceptable to leave it as a "medical condition," so that others didn't think of me as having serious moral or character flaws.

Through therapy, I realized it's okay to ask for help. I wish I had known that depression isn't a sign of weakness and that mental illness is a real thing. Mental illness does not make you crazy. I am not "less than" because of my problems.

My experience of depression is a cycle. I remember on the tough days that life will have meaning again. Rationally, I know there will be good days. But emotionally, it's a struggle.