

# THAT'S WHAT FRIENDS ARE FOR

By Ben Siegel

**WHEN THE GOING GETS TOUGH, THE tough** can get lonely. Everyone faces challenges that test one's resolve, self-esteem and the energy to keep going.

Andy Hvidsak understands that feeling. It is a mood that Andy feels more regularly – or perhaps more severely – than others. That is because Andy suffers from depression and bipolar disorder.

Depression is a condition that most non-sufferers have a pre-conceived notion about, usually involving sadness and loneliness. While that is not necessarily untrue, there is a great deal more to it than meets the eye.

Bipolar disorder is a type of depression which subjects sufferers to extreme highs and lows. When those with bipolar disorder are in either a manic or depressed state, their relationships with friends and loved ones are affected in severe ways. Medication and doctor consultation is generally instrumental, but there are other ways to feel relief.

An estimated 15 percent of Americans have suffered from one form of depression or another, which is a lot when you consider the many forms of the disease.

Andy wants to help those who suffer here in Western New York, and he's doing it in a holistic and purely humanistic way: He is reaching out as only a friend can.

In the process, Andy's goal to help heal others is helping to heal him as well.



## PEER-TO-PEER

There are many ways to help those who suffer from depression, including occasionally intense medical intervention.

But at the root of most long-term treatment options for the disease which causes social anxiety, a lack of self-confidence and even suicidal tendencies, is the importance of community and interpersonal relations.

Support groups are a big help, putting those suffering in the midst of other people, some with the same condition as them and others without any. By getting people together to talk and share, laugh and cry, support and motivate, sufferers start to feel their importance.

This mode of treatment is familiar to Andy. It's what helped convince him to reach out.

"I can hopefully understand what they're going through," he says. "That's what motivated me to give back. Because I've been suffering myself."

He is the first to admit that the lows can feel very low. "I've had the feeling, like, I have no friend in the whole world. When you're at that point, sometimes you just need a little push."

## GETTING OUT THERE

There are many agencies in Western New York that serve those looking for a friend or confidant. Peer-support groups match profiles of those looking for a friend with those volunteering to be one. Personality traits, interests and activities are matched, qualified by research and a background test. Once the agency has found a match, a volunteer is asked to spend a certain number of hours a week or month with a friend. From there, the relationship is as it would be with any other sort of friendship.

Andy chose Compeer, a local organization which caters to those with mental health issues like depression. Andy has gained three friends in the two years he has been a volunteer with Compeer, and says he enjoys the time they spend together.

"You call them on the phone, try to set up times to go out with them. It might be just going to a Bisons game, maybe a coffee," says Andy. If a friend's interests are shared – which, chances are they are, given Compeer's extensive profiling – they have even more chances to bond.

Andy says the relationship forged is hopefully as authentic and significant as any other friendship. The circumstances for the two parties meeting does not hinder the person's desire to meet and socialize with people. It helps in many ways.

"I think at first it's kind of awkward because they're wondering, 'Why are you doing this?' They're kind of hesitant but once you start sharing with them," Andy says things become more natural.

## A TWO-WAY ROAD

In Andy's case, his personal history has impacted his Compeer relationships in many ways, and vice-versa.

"I feel like I'm giving back. I suffer from mental illness; I feel that's something I understand. I tell my friends, look, I'm not perfect. I've got a family, a job. Look at me, who suffers and who appreciates the friendship just as much as they might appreciate the friendship I'm giving them."

Gaining a new friend may not sound like such a big deal, but for someone for whom any kind of social interaction spells terror, this kind of work means a lot.

"I think it's like therapy for me. I think getting healthy is a combination of things – taking your meds, seeing your professional." But it's about more than that.

"For me, (it's about) being able to sit and talk with a friend who is suffering. There's not too many people who I can share with, too. To gain the confidence to starting your day. To feel good about how you, maybe, wear an outfit. Like, I'm proud and ready to face the world."

**For more about volunteering to be a friend to someone in need, contact Compeer at 716.883.3331 or visit [compeerbuffalo.org](http://compeerbuffalo.org).**