

# Ticket Talk



## Podcast Transcript

December 2013

### Ticket Talk with Anupa Iyer

**Interviewer:** The opinions expressed in this interview are those of Anupa Iyer and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.

**Opening:** You are listening to the Social Security Administration's Ticket to Work podcast series. Get answers to your questions, access information and resources, and receive expert advice on work incentives and the Ticket to Work program.

**Interviewer:** The month of September marks the start of the fall season and for many children and young adults, the start of a new school year. For recent graduates who are making the transition from school to employment, this can be an exciting and challenging time. Today we're speaking with Anupa Iyer, a young woman who experienced tremendous challenges associated with mental illness during college and after transitioning from school into the workforce. She struggled with the medications her doctors prescribed for her, which left her unable to read, write, or hold conversations. Her condition left her unable to continue working and she spent time in and out of institutions trying to recover. Eventually she knew she'd have to make a leap of faith. Not wanting to live the life of a self-described over-medicated zombie, Anupa networked through her previous employer to find a new job opportunity without disclosing her disability. She then left the institution where she was receiving treatment and focused on reintegrating into society and the workforce. Work and school helped her rebuild her life and her confidence. While it took 8 years before she was ready to share her story, her challenges with mental illness have helped to shape her career. Today Anupa works as an advocate for young adults with disabilities. Her advocacy, outspokenness, and commitment to the Americans with Disabilities Act earned her recognition from the White House. Anupa was recently honored as a champion for change for embodying the next generation of

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leadership within the disability community. Anupa, congratulations and thank you for joining us!

**Anupa Iyer:** Thank you.

**Interviewer:** Will you tell us a little about your personal experience with mental illness?

**Anupa Iyer:** Sure, I think the introduction was just pretty great in describing my background, but for many young adults, psychiatric disability can start right when you're beginning college. And so for me, I had actually graduated early from high school – I graduated high school when I was sixteen and spent my first two years after high school going to community college. And after that community college I transferred to the University of California Los Angeles. It was during that time when I was at UCLA, and I was in – I went from being a very small community college where I had a lot of friends and I was doing really well academically, to being in a classroom with 400, 500 students. It was just tough transition and it was during that time that I began to start, I guess, losing confidence in myself. And I started having an eating disorder, and I began with my eating disorder as a way to just fit in and feel better about myself but soon the eating disorder began to take over my life. I was unable to go to class because I spent so much time focusing on not eating that I didn't have the energy to go to class or do my homework, and my grades began to slip. And so it was this really negative cycle, where I was then beginning to feel depressed, so I would plunge further into the eating disorder and then I wouldn't do well academically, and then I'd get depressed, and it was a vicious cycle. But I was ultimately able to graduate, and I graduated UCLA when I was 19. I'd always wanted to go to graduate school, but at that point I felt that I wasn't ready to take on the challenges of graduate school, so I thought I'd take a break. I was working at a mall and I saw some janitors who were at the mall who didn't have gloves, and I got really angry about this and started researching janitors' rights and found the Labor Movement and I interviewed and I got a job as an organizer for a very large labor union. And so at 19 I began travelling all over the country working as an organizer. It was an incredibly stressful experience. I loved what I did but the hours were really demanding, and it just kept exacerbating my psychiatric disability. Eventually I moved to

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Washington, DC – it was about a year and a half later – for the union and I ended up having my...I was losing a lot of weight at that point, and it was quite noticeable. My employers were kind enough to grant me a two-month medical leave to go to an eating disorder facility in California. I went there and I came back, and it was at that point that the sort of, you go from this environment where all it is is about about healing and dealing with your mental health and you're back, and I was all alone in DC, and I was going through a really rough period, and so I ended up, when I got back, having my first suicide attempt, my first serious suicide attempt. I did go back to work, I had another two months medical leave, and then I did go back to work. My employer allowed me to go back and work in Los Angeles, which is where I'm from, but six months into that I realized that this is not going to work out. My family wanted me to focus more on dealing with my mental health and so at, you know, 21I left my job and for the next two years I cycled in and out of institutions. And just like you said, I was you know, and at that point I was also on SSDI. And like you said, at one point I was so frustrated that I was in an institution again – this was the third time I had been in that same institution, and nothing was seeming to get better – and I wanted to feel like I was doing something with my life. And I thought, perhaps rather than being a patient, being a regular person who has a real job would make a difference for my mental health. And so while I was in the facility I was able to get a job with my old employer and it was located in Seattle, Washington. So I moved up there, and I worked for them for about a year. And at that point I realized, okay, I love being in this new environment, I love working, but I really have to make sure that the work I do is going to be something that helps with my recovery process and not hurt it. And a job that was demanding a lot of hours and didn't, you know, have that much vacation time, I felt wasn't the best for me. So, I left that job, and ended up going into HR, and I did HR for about five years and then decided that the only way I was really going to make change for people with disabilities was to go to law school, so that's a little bit about me.

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**Interviewer:** Wow, that is an absolutely incredible journey and road that you've travelled. So what motivated you to share your story and to become an advocate for others with psychiatric disabilities? It sounds like it was part of your self-discovery journey there.

**Anupa Iyer:** Yeah I mean, that's a really interesting question. You know, when I was applying for law school, the reason I applied to law school was because I really wanted to learn the law so I could use it to empower other people with psychiatric disabilities. Because I noticed, when I was inside of an institution or trying to get a job in between my institutionalization, I didn't know what my rights were. I feel like I can do a lot of research online and you know, I had an undergraduate, I had a bachelor's degree, but I still couldn't figure out what my rights were. I thought the only way I could learn my rights and be able to help others was to go to law school. When I was beginning to apply for internships, I did apply for internships that were in the disability rights field. So when I was applying to those internships, I said that I was a person with a psychiatric disability and my personal passion is why I wanted to do this work. But beyond that, I never told anybody else because I was really ashamed at how people would treat me. It was during my final year in law school that I interned at the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and the way I got the internship was through mentorship and networking, which I guess we may discuss later. But it was at the EEOC they were holding a hearing about employment of people with mental disabilities, and this is right after the new ADA Act regulations. They were looking for someone with a psychiatric disability who had been in and out of institutions who could talk about the importance of work. And it was at that moment that something just clicked in my head, and I felt this was a platform through which I could share my story, because they were looking for someone, and I felt, "here I was." And I met those boxes. I could use a national platform to help other young people like me have hope and know their rights. I thought well, if no one else is going to talk about this, I can. I've already put my story out on the public record. I may as well use it to get other people to be okay about having a psychiatric disability.

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**Interviewer:** So your initial concerns of being judged a certain way because of your mental disability really weren't realized. When you started to share your story it really helped people open up about their own experiences?

**Anupa Iyer:** Yeah, that's correct. But I think what put me in a unique position is that I do work for – the field I'm working in is disability law.

**Interviewer:** Right.

**Anupa Iyer:** So I thought that I'm in - the employers I was looking for jobs with were all sort of employers who would respect the fact that I have a psychiatric disability, and so I wasn't concerned about potential backlash from employers, and that was another reason why I felt it was totally okay to share my story on such a national platform...

**Interviewer:** Sure, sure, that makes a lot of sense. So what has your recovery and reintegration been like? Any words of encouragement you can offer our listeners who might be able to relate to your experiences?

**Anupa Iyer:** So I always do believe that – don't give up hope. I loved working, I loved being busy all the time, and here I was, just either in a hospital or sitting at home. And so that's why I think it's really really important for other young people to understand that they should always keep hoping and pursue their passions. And maybe your life is going to take a slightly different turn than you had initially imagined when you were ten or twelve, before you started experiencing your psychiatric disability, but that's okay. And find the beauty in the way that your life is now and work with your disability to do what you want to do.

**Interviewer:** And It sounds like the mantra of believe in yourself is something that we should all keep in mind when we're dealing with things like this.

**Anupa Iyer:** Absolutely. And I think what's also really important is for young people who are entering the workforce is to also find other people who believe in them.

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I would never have imagined getting the opportunity to work as a law clerk for a federal agency, and let alone working for the commissioner of the EEOC, I never thought that was possible. And having someone else believe in me helped me get this kind of position and while I was here every, you know the commissioner and all of her special assistants worked with me to make sure that I could be the best advocate and attorney possible. And I felt very free to share my experiences knowing that they would be mentors for me.

**Interviewer:** Let's go down that path a little bit further. How has employment impacted your life?

**Anupa Iyer:** Oh my gosh, tremendously! For me, it really made a huge difference and then after I finished law school I had a one-year fellowship and it was at that point I was travelling, I was working in Eastern Europe and South Africa and that was a very difficult experience for me, and I ended up deciding that...I had initially, when I graduated from law school, wanted to do international human rights and disability law. I had this amazing fellowship and it was doing exactly what I thought I wanted to do but I realized that wasn't helpful for my recovery. And so I came back to the US and I was living with my fiancée but I didn't have a job. And I was actually noticing while I wasn't working I was starting to get depressed all over again, and experiencing some of the stuff I hadn't experienced in years. And I was afraid of how this would impact my recovery because I didn't want to go too far down that rabbit hole. And I realized that when I'm busy and when I'm working I'm really happy. But when I started noticing that I was feeling depressed again, I called my old supervisor at the EEOC and said, "Can I just come back every day and be in intern, a volunteer?" They were more than happy to have me come, and it was I think the importance of work is having a place to go every day, creating a routine, but also feeling really valued for who you are...

**Interviewer:** And work for you seems to be part of that therapeutic process, then.

**Anupa Iyer:** Absolutely.

**Interviewer:** That's very insightful.

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**Anupa Iyer:** I think the important thing is to – and it was something I learned from one of my supervisors here – is to find ways to work with your psychiatric disability so that work doesn't necessarily exacerbate it. Because I know for me I can get really stressed out and really really anxious. So, I tried to make sure that my internship and now that I'm working as a contractor at the EEOC, I've wanted to make sure that the work I was going to do wasn't going to hurt me. I realized in my previous fellowship had hurt my recovery.

**Interviewer:** So you've been able to work within the bounds of your mental illness in your current employment. Has it impacted your current employment in any way?

**Anupa Iyer:** You know, I'm really fortunate that I work with amazing people. And I've been lucky that everybody at my office is really supportive but it's also important for me to have conversations with them to let them know where I'm at. I understand that disability disclosure is a personal choice for everybody, but I've chosen to disclose and ask for specific accommodations because I know that without that I might not be the best employee I could be.

**Interviewer:** Well that sounds like great advice based on your experience. That's fantastic. Anupa, can you tell us about your organization, SANE, S-A-N-E?

**Anupa Iyer:** Yeah, I started SANE, which is actually Self Advocates Now Empowered. The website is [beinsane.org](http://beinsane.org). And I started Self Advocates Now Empowered as a way to do advocacy for other young people with psychiatric disabilities. Because I feel the only way that we can challenge stigma and make ourselves a more powerful group of people is by organizing and by coming together and so that's what SANE is trying to do. The ultimate goal is to create, to develop an organization that uses social media to bring young people together to do legislative advocacy on issues that affect us. I can inspire other young people who are dealing with similar issues and help guide them and they can be mentors to other people.

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**Interviewer:** So you're trying to help people walk down the path you've travelled yourself in becoming comfortable with who you are and dealing with the issues you have to deal with and yet still be able to function in this life and be able to overcome those stigmas that are usually associated with those types of situations.

**Anupa Iyer:** Yes, that's exactly right. Very well said.

**Interviewer:** Well that is very very admirable, so Anupa, thank you so much for sharing your story with our listeners. It's been incredibly insightful and inspiring to hear the challenges that you've overcome and the journey that you've travelled.

**Anupa Iyer:** thank you so much for having me here. And I really appreciate being a part of this program and hope that I've offered some advice and insight to all of the people listening out there.

**Interviewer:** I think our listeners will appreciate everything you've said today. The transition to employment can be challenging for anyone, but it is also rewarding. Employment not only builds your resume, skillset, and financial security, it also builds your confidence, your social network, and your emotional well-being. Social Security's Ticket to Work and Work Incentives are here to help you on your path to employment. For more information about Ticket to Work or help locating a service provider, visit [www.socialsecurity.gov/work](http://www.socialsecurity.gov/work) or call the Ticket to Work Help Line at 1-866-968-7842 for voice or 1-866-833-2967 for TTY.

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