Recovering After a Crisis

by FLISS BAKER

The Difficult Process of Bipolar Recovery

Recovery is a very personal process that has no time limit. It is not straightforward — there are twists and turns along the way. It stops and starts and sometimes moves backwards. It is a journey we take in the hope that we can live a life with meaning, and mental and physical capability. It is not easy.

Bipolar is a lifelong illness, and everybody's experience is different. I accept I have bipolar for life, but it's important to remember it doesn't define you. We can recover over and over again to live meaningful lives.

When Does Crisis End and Recovery Begin?

Good question. In my opinion this is something no professional, family member or friend can answer. It is usually only the person concerned who can differentiate between the end of their crisis and the beginning of their recovery. It may be the day of discharge from hospital, when medication becomes effective, or when it just 'feels like' recovery.

Personally, I can remember poignant moments where I have thought, 'Crisis over, the next stage lies ahead.' It usually begins when I am able to reflect on the recent events instead of fighting the immediate moments.

Understanding That Recovery Is Difficult

I remember back to my first discharge from hospital in 2008. I had spiralled out of control after years of prolonged stress and was admitted into a psychiatric hospital. I rapid cycled from full blown mania to suicidal depression and was trialled on different mood stabilisers, experiencing a range of side effects.

I never expected to create such bonds with people in hospital, but you do. I am sure this is the same for anyone who attends support groups or drop-in centres. Having a person nod and empathize, having gone through a similar experience, is incredibly valuable. While the nurses acted with professionalism, my fellow patients held my hand, saw in my eyes when I was going to cry and identified my triggers before I had.

When you are with people 24 hours a day in an enclosed environment you learn everything about them. It speeds up the process of friendship and after only a few months it feels like you have known them for years.

I was a patient for six months and then in and out of hospital for another six, and I thought that would be the hardest stage to get through. Recovery seemed like a beaming ray of light, but I underestimated how challenging it would be.

I remember waking up in my own home with no routine of hospital breakfast and seeing familiar faces of nurses and patients. My family and friends were at work and I felt empty.

I looked out of the window and saw a young woman walking down the street with her children and wondered how she managed. How could she get up, shower, have breakfast and get dressed — and help two children to do the same? I felt a pang of jealousy.

I was visited regularly by a community psychiatric nurse and saw a psychiatrist and therapist once a month, but this was nothing compared to the support in hospital. I went back to basics and lived by a timetable. I had to complete one activity in each box for morning, noon and night.

I was initially overenthusiastic and set unrealistic targets, such as, ‘I want to read a book,’ but was told that my target must be measurable. It was recommended I read just to read one page only, so I could feel satisfaction and motivation from my achievement.

Other targets were simple, such as get out of bed, shower or prepare a meal. Over time I joined a gym and twice a week I rode the bus into town. It was a difficult and lengthy task and I remember sitting on the bus wondering how it was possible in past life to do these things without so much effort.

It’s difficult not to compare yourself to others because in recovery you are on a different playing field and everyone else seems so competent. It’s easy to put yourself down and feel like a failure when you try and sometimes don’t succeed, and this can increase the risk of relapse.

What Does Recovery Mean to Me?

Recovery is a game of snakes and ladders. You climb up the ladders but slide down the snakes. If you are off work for a period of time going back is climbing a ladder — and climbing that ladder can feel like a huge risk.

Having issues with concentration or forgetting something important feels like slipping down a snake, but that is why your support network of professionals, family, friends and colleagues is so important. Speaking up about your recovery and your difficulties is paramount but at the same time we need people around to listen, understand and be patient.

I have felt others’ irritation when I’ve turned up late because I panicked beforehand, or let someone down last minute because of a mood swing, and it’s demoralizing. I’ve learnt now that you have to push yourself when you can but put yourself first and say no when you can’t. Other people’s comments have to be brushed off and ignored otherwise absorption can exacerbate symptoms.

I often find it’s good to talk to people after a difficult event just to try and help them understand my feelings and actions and if I can’t do that I’ve sent an email or a text. Good people around you will understand and those that don’t may not be a positive influence in your recovery.

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What Helped My Recovery?

Here is my checklist of everything that helped me throughout my stages of recovery:

- Talking about my challenges.
- Having a strong support network.
- Understanding and patience from others.
- Setting small, measurable and achievable targets.
- Taking it day by day, moment by moment.
- Introducing activities I enjoyed, not just daily tasks.
- Social activity.
- Saying ‘No’ if things felt too much.
- Allowing myself time to do nothing if my body felt that way.

- Accepting bad days and not beating myself up.
- Learning from every challenge e.g. managing irritability by taking myself to my ‘safe’ place straight away and putting music or the TV on to distract myself.
- Stopping comparing myself to others. Your recovery is your own.
- Surrounding myself with little things that make me smile.
- Eating a balanced diet and eating regularly.
- Exercising to the best of my ability, which may be nothing to begin with to walking around the garden or in my case, playing with my niece.
- Focusing on the task in hand; the rest of the day will develop. If I thought of the whole day I would stay in bed but if I thought only of my shower I often found afterwards I was motivated to do other things.

My Recovery Now

I am three weeks out of hospital and currently on respite. I’ve probably cried more out of hospital because I’m now able to reflect on what has happened over the last three months and in all honesty, it’s been traumatic. I have relapsed a number of times over the last seven years but I try not to be scared. It is a process and we must allow ourselves and our bodies time to rest.

A few days ago I made an ‘emergency’ phone call to my family and they talked me through my worried, impulsive thoughts. I did my deep breathing and listened to reassurance telling me I would get through it. And I did.

I also took my own advice not to bully myself the next day. If it was a snakes and ladders game I slipped down the snake that night, but I am now back up the ladder and focusing on relaxing. Recovery is to know your own limits and I’m doing my best to start living my life with meaning once again. I am back to my writing, socializing with friends and taking it slowly. If I relapse again I will face it but for now, I’m OK, and that is what is most important to my recovery.