Plan for the Future or Live in the Moment?

by FLISS BAKER

Learning to Live in the Moment With Bipolar

Up until seven years ago I was a future planner. I was ambitious, motivated and driven, and I believed I would be successful in life. I excelled at school, college, university and throughout my years of employment.

I owned credit cards but I managed them and paid them off monthly, ensuring I got the lowest interest deals. I planned ahead for safety and security. I was loyal to the business I worked for and I knew my path would be to the board of directors. I wanted to do all I could to give myself the best possible quality of life.

Never, ever, ever did I expect my life to change so drastically at the age of 26, resulting in depression, oncoming mania, an eating disorder, and an overall inability to cope with any of life's stresses.

The Girl I Used to Be

I know the best practice of discussing mental health is referring to ourselves as people living with illnesses that do not define who we are. However, I have to be totally honest — I often refer to myself as the girl who *used* to do things and *used* to feel capable in her abilities.

However, would I even want to be that girl again?

I know I was a different person pre-diagnosis, with a different set of values and beliefs and a fixed view of my future. At the same time I was judgmental, lacked empathy, and was a perfectionist. I saw my career as my life and I built my self-worth on its achievement.

I am different now. I think differently, feel more intensively, empathize more with others, feel pain and isolation, and ultimately see the world through the eyes of a woman that has been broken and put back together many times.

But most importantly, I no longer live for my future — I have learned only to live for the day.

No Future in Depression

Depression rakes up the past, brings you into the immediate, and promises a bleak future.

When I am well I can keep up with bills, phone calls, and taking care of my business, but as my mind and body spirals towards depression nothing in the future exists. I have stared at piles of letters, knowing that some are financial reminders, but been completely unable to open them. I knew I was incapable of coping with the consequential tasks.

There were moments where I felt so worthless I wanted to die; I didn't care about the future because I didn't

want to be in it. A simple task to someone else was so complex to me. Why on earth would I have considered my future at those points? I couldn't get through the now.

Professional Guidance

I have had a lot of therapy over the last seven years, starting with inpatient counseling that delved into the depths of my hurt and pain from the past and relinquished the dark feelings attached to those memories.

I was given cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) to treat my eating disorder, and that was the first experience I had that started to help me face my future. But I learned moving forwards depended on tiny baby steps and nothing more.

Further therapy enabled me to view myself as a whole and look at my personal qualities. I became aware of my perfectionist, people-pleasing traits and how I loaded pressure on myself. I had to learn to have self-compassion and accept myself.

When I left the hospital, supported by a community mental health team, I started completing a basic timetable with only one thing to do a day; in depression, the task could be simply getting out of bed.

Living in the now at that point was hard and the vision of my future had broken into millions of little pieces. I knew I was years away from creating a new picture in my head.

Look at Me Now

I'm managing. Bills get paid, invoices are created and articles are written, but I am not consistent in my delivery — but by god, I do try. I have months of productivity, only to face the challenge of another bipolar episode. Only last week I had to go to the hospital for two nights due to some serious side effects from a new medication.

I can only live in the now. It's as though my brain has been conditioned through experience and professional support to know future ideals can lead to disappointment if my illness rears its ugly head. One day at a time.

When I receive a letter I open it or put it in a pile that I look at a few times per week. The key thing is not to overwhelm myself, and if I do start to feel stressed I speak up — whether that be to a family member, friend, health professional or charity support worker.

I think everyone would agree that bipolar brings you into the immediate. Every day can be a challenge and we have to find different solutions that work for us.

I focus on being cautious and careful in my well periods, allowing flexibility if I become ill. In the past I have empowered family and friends to step in and manage my affairs while I receive treatment. This decision enables me to feel in control, even though I'm incapable of carrying out some of the tasks.

The biggest thing is accepting how I live. I don't want to be the "old me" or refer to myself as a different person. I am just Fliss, with a different life path. It has changed me; I am no longer a future planner but rather a daily manager of my lifelong illness.

I have learned that in doing all the following things I have become a better person with more awareness and knowledge, who does experience joy and goodness throughout periods of my life. Don't forget to:

- Live in the now.
- Take care of yourself every day.
- Make your life easier by relieving as much as stress as possible.
- Remember future visions will change, but it's important to accept the flexibility and allow yourself to be taken on the journey — don't fight it.

Live for today and plan only what you can manage.