Living a Purposeful Life with Bipolar Disorder

by KITT O'MALLEY

Kitt's Story on Living a Purposeful Life with Bipolar Disorder

I live a purposeful life with a diagnosis of bipolar disorder. My life has meaning. Living with a serious mental illness gives me insight, allowing me to help others. I am grateful that I can write and share my journey with others, hoping that it inspires others to accept themselves.

My treatment regimen and coping skills have evolved over time. As a suicidal 18-year-old, I received cognitive therapy at UCLA's student health services. Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) helped me identify my suicidal thoughts, stop them, and rewrite them into more rational thoughts. That skill stays with me to this day.

In my twenties, I studied and sought therapy that explored the effects that alcoholism and family dynamics had on me. Then at thirty, as a psychotherapist of severely emotionally disturbed teens, following the deaths of my grandmother and a friend from high school, I fell into a depression so deep that psychotherapy alone was not enough. From then on, I have needed medication to maintain my mental health.

Until I was thirty-nine, I remained stable on antidepressant medication and psychotherapy. At that point, experiencing elation and intrusive religious thoughts, I knew I was hypomanic and needed psychiatric treatment for bipolar disorder.

From that point on, I've been treated for bipolar disorder, a brain disorder which requires daily medication. Medication treats, but does NOT cure, the underlying brain disorder. I still experience symptoms of bipolar disorder, albeit milder. Living well with bipolar means I must attend psychotherapy, use my hard-earned insight and arsenal of coping skills, and exercise self-care.

I make sure I get a good night's sleep every night. Regular sleep is essential to good mental health, especially when living with bipolar disorder. If racing thoughts keep me awake, I listen to a mindfulness app sleep story, or two or three. Recently, after a long run of ramping hypomania, I turned to my psychiatrist for medication. I MUST silence those hypomanic racing thoughts to sleep.

I do what I can, when I can. I've learned to lower my expectations of myself. When necessary, I allow myself to change my mind, cancel plans, drop out of classes, and avoid commitments. I have redefined what success looks like. I reject the need to be productive.

Years of therapy have given me insight. I'm aware of the stressors that trigger my mood cycling. I write out thoughts that clutter my mind. During the day I write, blog, and use social media to connect with others in the mental health community.

Excerpted from Kitt O'Malley's upcoming memoir, Balancing Act – Writing Through a Bipolar Life, due for publication on September 19, 2019.