Coming to Terms With a Bipolar Disorder Diagnosis

by KIKI WOODHAM

Accepting Bipolar

Bipolar disorder can be miserable. Nobody is denying that. Sometimes it robs us of our will to live; sometimes we're soaring through the clouds and don't realize we're flying too close to the sun until we crash and burn. But no matter what the mood or episode, we're in it for life. It's not going away - so we've got to learn to accept it, to *own* it, to make it our own unique tool.

It's Not All Bad

I used to look at bipolar disorder as a kind of parasite, gnawing away at my insides until there was nothing left. Then, slowly, a switch flipped somewhere in the back of my consciousness and I saw the symbiotic nature of my illness. I've learned to use it to my best advantage. This isn't a flu that will go away soon; it's a chronic illness that's so intricately woven through every inch of my personality that there'd be no untangling the threads even if I wanted to – and I don't want to. *Being* bipolar, not *having* bipolar disorder, is what makes me *me.*

When I was first diagnosed almost three years ago, it was a huge blow. I suddenly felt as if my whole personality was not actually mine, but belonged instead to an illness I'd suffered from for more than half my life. I questioned everything I was. I wondered whether I'd still be an artist if I weren't bipolar. I wondered if I'd have been able to finish university, or have had healthier relationships and lasting friendships if I weren't bipolar. Would I have been a better daughter, mother, or partner? Would I have moved less often, held a job for more than a few months, or been able to manage money better?

The answer is that my life undoubtedly would have been drastically different. To pretend otherwise is just silly. I would have been a completely different person without this illness. For a long time I saw this as a tragic burden, my greatest flaw. I wallowed in my regrets, and mourned the loss of the life I imagined I might have had if this illness had been caught early on. I tried to behave more like "normal" people, and shut away all the things that were so very "bipolar" about myself.

After a long period of forcing unnatural behavior on myself and looking back longingly and miserably on everything that had gone wrong in my life, I began to see the glaring flaw in my way of thinking. Regardless of intention or regret, this was what my life had been. That's when I first noticed the delicate butterfly effect this insidious disease had created.

Next page: changing your perspective.

Beauty Is in the Eye of the Beholder

Did I have flaws? Absolutely. We all do. But I realized it felt dismissive to assume they were purely negative. I could see myself as simply impulsive and reckless – but no, I was also brave and spontaneous. I've been able to

make snap decisions throughout my life that would terrify some people, decisions with consequences (both bad and good) that have made me stronger and wiser in the end.

Instead of feeling flighty and immature, I saw the almost childlike wonder with which I perceived the world around me, the same wonder that gave me the ability to see breathtaking beauty in mundane objects and experiences. My constant awe at the world around me inspires me to imagine and create. I notice tiny details others don't, or simply see my surroundings in strange and different ways that inform my artistic style and drive me to express my unusual vision.

I've always struggled with seeing projects through to completion. I'm far more accomplished at starting things than I am at finishing them, and I've taken a fair amount of criticism for my seeming inability to reach the finish line, but was that really always a bad trait? I noticed that in the process of beginning my various endeavors I've picked up so many skills that I never would have learned otherwise. I've tried silk paper-making, spinning (yarn, not cycling), typography, website design, metalsmithing, screen printing, translation, and so much more.

Without this odd set of skills, the result of so many halfhearted beginnings, I wouldn't have been uniquely positioned to start the business I run today. And now that I'm pretty stable, I'm also in a good place to see many of my projects through to fruition (and to recognize which ones should be abandoned early on, and there's no shame in knowing that).

This is the symbiosis I see; every disadvantage has its advantage, every cloud its silver lining. Perhaps I am infected by something, but the symptoms of my disease are also the traits that make me strong, smart, creative, spontaneous, caring, and brave.

Next page: staying positive.

It Will Get Better

Despite the positive traits I've learned to see in myself, bipolar disorder is still a painful and volatile illness. There are awful days and there are great ones. There are miserable months (and sometimes years), and there are summers full of life and love and joy; I'm pretty honest about where I've been up to now. My life won't ever compare to the picture-perfect existence I'd imagined for myself as a kid, and there is no handbook for building a happy and fulfilling life around (and in spite of) mental illness. I'm writing my own manual as I go along.

I've learned that, no matter how deep the despair, the good *will* follow the bad. Episodes will come along and knock you down - but being episodic in nature, *will* eventually leave. The proverbial sun will shine again.

I used to dread the next episode. When would it come? How long would it last? Would I have to go to the hospital this time? Nearly every waking hour was occupied with these fears, and all they seemed to do was make the symptoms worse. Eventually I figured out that with a little practice and the right balance of medications, I now have a lot more say over when the sun rises.

I've learned to stop an oncoming mania in its tracks. I can also force myself to keep moving, keep fighting, and pull myself out of a depressive episode when one comes along. It doesn't always work perfectly, but I'm getting better at it every time. I'm not a slave to my illness anymore – I'm its master. I no longer fear the next episode. Don't get me wrong – I don't like them, I've just learned to better control them, and with more control comes more peace and acceptance.

I Am Not a Victim

I *am* in charge of this illness. As the saying goes, I have bipolar disorder, but bipolar disorder doesn't have me. I've had to overcome a fair amount of stigma (much of it self-inflicted), not to mention the physical and emotional hurdles of my illness, to get to where I am today.

I won’t ever have the kind of life you see in movies and on TV, and that’s ok. I don’t think anyone has that. Even the “normal” people in my life have their share of problems. *Everyone* does. What I do have is pretty good, and I like my life. I wouldn’t trade it for anything.