



Real People, Real Stories:

Life With
Bipolar Disorder

The
MIGHTY

PRESENTS

Getting a diagnosis is like jumping into an unknown pool. The initial plunge – the instant your body breaks water – can feel like a shock to your system. But once you’re there, in the water, if given the proper tools and support, you may find you’re able to swim, and that life is actually better because you made that plunge.

If you (or someone you love) just received a bipolar disorder diagnosis, you might still be reeling from that initial shock, or you might even be relieved. Whatever you’re feeling, it’s important to know you’re not alone. In this book of stories that have appeared on The Mighty – an online community for people who live with different disabilities and conditions – you’ll hear from a mother who’s open about her diagnosis with her kids, a man who explains why functioning with bipolar disorder can be a 24/7 job and a description of what it feels like to be manic. The opening piece is by three-time-Olympian Suzy Favor Hamilton, who last year opened up about living with bipolar disorder in her New York Times best-selling memoir, “[Fast Girl: A Life Spent Running From Madness](#).” If you have bipolar disorder, you’re in good company.

Some of the content discusses topics like suicide and self-harm, so know that if you need support, you can visit our [suicide prevention resources](#) page. You can call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255. And if anything, we hope that if you’re feeling overwhelmed, these stories are proof that it’s possible to swim.

Stay Mighty,

The Mighty Team

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Real People, Real Stories:

I'm an Olympian, Former Escort and Now – a Mental Health Advocate

by

Suzy Favor Hamilton

My Name Is Suzy Favor Hamilton. I was once one of the top middle distance runners in the world and a three-time Olympian. After my running career, I was a successful businesswoman, wife and mother living in Wisconsin. To many, my life appeared perfect. An image I had tried to live up to my entire life, the squeaky clean all-American girl who won races and played the role of “good girl” to a tee.

But in late 2012, at age 44, I was outed by an investigative tabloid as a high-end Las Vegas escort. I had been secretly escorting for the past year, and at the time, I would have told you I loved every minute of it. I was devastated when I was

outed not so much because of the public scrutiny and ridicule that were coming my way — not because I had tarnished my family name. I was devastated mostly because exposure would likely put an end to the secret life that had brought me everything I wanted and needed at the time. Thrill, taboo, admiration, money and most of all, sex.

Weeks later, reluctantly seeing a psychiatrist for the first time in order to keep loved ones from completely abandoning me, I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder and told the antidepressant I was prescribed and had been taking the past year and a half had likely triggered a mostly constant manic state, and in my case, an intensely sexual state, irrational in thought and oblivious to any ramifications of what I was doing. Antidepressants can be a big “no-no” for those with bipolar, I learned.

So here we are, three and a half years later, and I can say at times, recovery was a living hell, especially in that first year, but I’m doing quite well these days. My life is usually quite normal, I guess you could say, and I’ve found various forms of intense exercise are useful to take the place of my previous coping mechanisms that tended to get me in trouble. I crave independence these days, creating art, a little thrill here and there, and an extremely active outdoors lifestyle helps. Yoga has been a godsend and I’m now a certified yoga teacher. I have my moments where my triggers get the best of me and I’m best left alone until I come out of a depressive episode. I’m manic occasionally, but nothing like before. The mood stabilizer I’m on has worked well for me. Generally, life is pretty good.

I’m blessed to have a wonderful husband who amazingly stuck with me through all of this, though at times, he had one foot out the door. With education, he began to focus on the illness and not so much on the behavior. There was therapy and major bumps along the way, but we’ve made it. My daughter is as amazing as it gets and totally gets my illness. She’s mostly patient with me when I’m not quite there. She’s the light that keeps me going when I’m struggling. Most of my family and friends have stuck by me. Support is so, so key in recovery. I know how fortunate I am for so many reasons.

I decided to tell my story initially for selfish reasons. I simply wanted to be understood, on my terms and in my words. So I wrote a memoir, and it turned out to be a New York Times Best Seller. Who knew? To be understood is what we living with mental illness want so desperately. But I realized as the writing progressed this book might help others living with mental illness. We tend to take comfort in knowing we are not alone, and storytelling has a way of doing that. How many notes do I receive every week from people who say they relate to my story, whether it's my mania, my intimate relationship with anxiety and darkness, my history of eating disorder, my obsession for perfection and pleasing others? I can tell you the notes I receive (this happens a lot when people know you've been through some serious shit) remind me I'm not alone. I believe telling my story has done the same for others, and for that, the painful reliving of much of my journey was well worth it (the book was very challenging to write and at times, I just wanted to chuck it).

So now I travel the country, speaking my truth and advocating for the cause. I try to show others what mental illness looks like. I try to bring out in the open the rarely discussed sexual component of bipolar disorder. Even a lot of psychiatrists and psychologists have trouble going there. I try to show one can hit rock bottom, as I did in the aftermath of being outed, and still come out of it OK, that there is hope.

It's been an evolution, but I've come to feel strongly we should never feel shame about our mental illnesses, nor should we feel shame for the behaviors that may have resulted, at least in part due to the illness. I found that the shame — and believe me, I felt plenty of it initially — holds us back from moving forward in recovery. What we need is compassion and understanding. Simple as that. That's the message I try to spread each and every day, at least when my brain cooperates.

Thanks for listening.



Real People, Real Stories:

To Myself, the Day I Was Diagnosed: Bipolar Is Not the End, but the Beginning

by

Madelyn Heslet

The doctor just left your hospital room, and left you with some information that's hard to absorb. He said those two words and both your and your parents' hearts dropped through your stomachs onto the cold hospital floor. Bipolar disorder. It runs through your mind over and over like a bad memory. You're in shock, that's understandable. Your parents aren't speaking, and that freaks you out. But don't worry, they're in shock too. Don't worry at all, it will be OK.

I know you're scared, and I know you're confused. The same two questions are swimming in your head, how and why. You don't know how this happened, but now you know why. This diagnosis is the answer to so many things you've

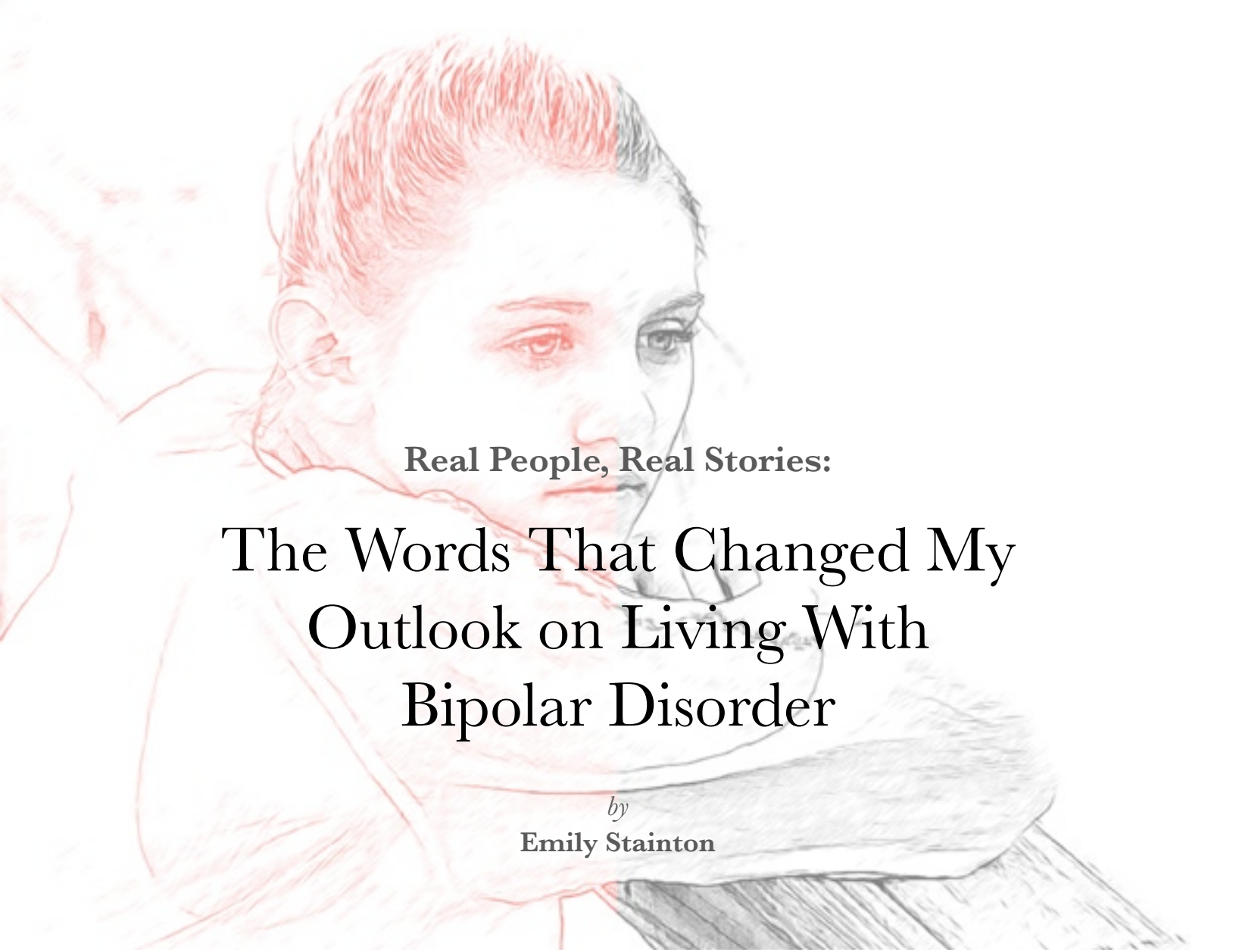
experienced since you were an adolescent. The mood swings, the unexplainable irritability and the risky behaviors. Now you know why. And I know that brings you a little bit of comfort. It feels good to know why, because now you can figure out how to feel better.

You feel like you've lost a part of yourself that has been replaced with something alien. But that's not true. You are still you, and you are not this illness. Yes, this illness is a part of you, and has been for some time. But it's a very small part. You are still smart, funny and charismatic, but you're also just a little bit more sad and a little bit more happy than everyone else at times. And that's OK. It's OK to be a little bit different, and that's nothing to be ashamed of. This diagnosis is nothing to be ashamed of, it's something to accept and then in time, to embrace.

You are calm now. You know it's treatable; manageable. You'll be starting medication today and counseling next week. It's important you continue with both. Both will keep you stable, and help you feel better. The coping skills you've learned in the hospital will, too. Just use them, and use your strength. You are stronger than you think, and you can get through this. Your new diagnosis is not the end, it is a new beginning. A new challenge, and you're great at overcoming challenges. You will overcome this shock and this fear. You will overcome.

It's sinking in now. You. Are. Bipolar. But you are also strong. Stick to your therapy and medication regimen, and cope in healthy ways and you will be OK. Repeat that to yourself. You will be OK. You are strong, and you are not alone, and you've got this. Don't worry, don't be scared, and remember, you've got this.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Elizabeth Hest". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with some loops and flourishes.



Real People, Real Stories:

The Words That Changed My Outlook on Living With Bipolar Disorder

by
Emily Stainton

My name is Emily. I'm 19 years old and I have bipolar disorder. Last year, I ran away from home, driving nearly 254 miles away from my family and friends. I was ready to drop out of high school, live off of the clothes on my back and somehow survive with no income and my car.

I felt like I didn't have a place in this world, but that wasn't the only thing that drove me away. Living with bipolar disorder is no joke, and neither is any mental illness. The best way to describe my brain is comparing it to static on a television. The constant white noise with black and white pixels jumping around on the screen makes it hard to find the balance between manic and calm. My

thoughts jump around, making it hard to focus and relax on one task at a time.

Finally when I decided to come home, I placed myself into a psychiatric hospital where I could find the proper tools to help cope with this disorder.

A dear friend of mine told me the day before admission into the hospital, “You are not your illness. You have a bipolar disorder, but Emily isn’t bipolar. Emily has bipolar disorder.” Those words rang through me like a bell. Those words still resonate with me and anyone else I know personally with this disorder. I repeat those words to others in the hopes it will be as helpful to them as it was to me.

After being in the hospital for a week, I still was not finished with my treatment. I lived in an inpatient facility where I had my own apartment and an amazing roommate for three months. My first step was to graduate. I had a tutor in the mornings while my five-hour afternoons were filled with therapy. I was prescribed medication that at first I refused to take. But when I finally started to take them, I noticed the static in my brain was slowly starting to fade. My thoughts were finally calm. Therapy and medicine were the best choices I made.

Here I am, a year later, finally understanding my place in the world. I have a new outlook on life, and living doesn’t feel miserable anymore. Time helps healing. It’s been a long, grueling process, but I did it.

This message is not for sympathy, but simply to help bring awareness to mental illness. My only goal in life is to be happy for myself and to help the world in the most positive way I can. I know saving the world isn’t possible, but if I can help even one person, I’ve done my job here on Earth. There is help out there, and you shouldn’t be ashamed to reach out for it. Giving up isn’t my choice, and it shouldn’t be anyone else’s either. I hope my story can help you reach out and remember you are not your illness.

Emily D. Stainton



Real People, Real Stories:

‘Functional’ Is a 24/7 Job When You Live With Bipolar Disorder

by
Steve Imperato

In the dark of morning, I struggle the most. Every day, I wake up and try to convince my rapid cycling bipolar brain to function. There is a debate. Every day. I stand at my bed and argue silently as to whether or not I should crawl back into it. It is in this moment I struggle with being functional the most. This exact moment.

Realistically, I don't actually get to claim the title "functional" until I am up for about two hours. Technically, I claim it as soon as I hit the shower.

For a moment, let's back track to the night before. At 10 p.m., which should be my bedtime, my brain suddenly decides that it's time to take over the world.

Fractions of ideas, half-concocted story lines, bits and pieces of thoughts and images project into my consciousness. They're just semi-completed annoyances trying to self-actualize into my brain without actually being a whole self. Nothing is accomplished, as I allow them to stream through without attaching any value statements to them.

But they certainly keep the lights on while they party, while I lie in my bed, awake.

As anyone who takes psych meds may know, well, sometimes they can destroy us with side effects. It's like stopping that party by literally burning the house down, party-goers inside. (On a side note, one med is trying to ruin my cholesterol, but that's a different story.) In this instance, another med makes me drink ridiculous amounts of fluids to combat the vicious, unending thirst that accompanies the ridiculous and incessant urination. I wake up every two hours to take care of business. I am in the process of getting blood analyzed and all that jazz to determine if this is, indeed, the problem.

So, I go to bed every night with the synapse remix blasting in my head, preventing me from going to sleep, and the brutal side effects of the sacred medication cause me to continually wake up. Often less than five hours total, no more than two hours at a time.

Yes, I am tired. In the dark of morning, I struggle to reason that going to work is the most logical conclusion at that particular point in time and space. But I am here to rise, period. Sucking it up one day at a time just seems like the right thing to do. It's a fight, right? We don't get paid, and we can't win, if we just sit in the corner.

In the dark of morning, with little to no faculties available, I can't give in. I just can't. So I don't.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Steve Szymanski". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with some loops and flourishes.



Real People, Real Stories:

The Secret Truths of a Bipolar Girl

by

Danielle Hark

You have a secret. A secret you've been keeping for years, if not forever, from your family, your friends, your boss and maybe even yourself. A secret so secret if people knew, it might change your relationships. They might judge you. They might hate you. They might even fear you. You're different. You're weird. You're sick. You've tried to change it, but it's just who you are and you can't keep it inside any more.

You have bipolar disorder.

Bipolar. Bi-polar. Manic Depressive. It doesn't get easier the more you say it.

You try to use “mood disorder” or “depressed” instead because you think it will have less stigma, but you know the truth. At the moment of diagnosis, you went from being that person — the eccentric-but-sometimes-sad creative — to that person: the “crazy” one. You’re unpredictable. You’re freakish. You’re scary.

Pretty little cocktails of yellow, pink and blue pills abound. One to bring you up, one to take you down, one to keep you in the middle. One to wake you and one to put you to sleep, because you sure as hell can’t sleep right. Sometimes you stay up all night shopping online, taking photos or writing for hours on end, creative energy and ideas pulsing through your revved body and mind, and it feels great. Until it doesn’t.

Enter the inevitable crash. You’re suddenly knocked over by a massive wave of sadness, isolation, self-loathing and hopelessness. You’re left on the floor of the shower trying to breathe through your tears. Sweating, trembling, heart palpitating.

You stop answering your phone, and eventually it stops ringing. Your friends are no longer your friends, except for those select few who won’t let you push them away no matter how hard you try. Your family is tired of dealing with it all, and you can’t blame them.

You stop going out. You stop taking care of yourself. Can you even remember when you last showered?

Soon you’re stuck in your room. Your computer and your TV are your only true friends, an ever-present distraction from reality. You Facebook. You tweet. You blog. Pretending all the while that you’re doing great. You smile for pictures, if you can remember how to smile. Or you use old pictures from times when you were thinner and happier, at least in appearance. If your Facebook world doesn’t know, perhaps it isn’t real. That’s the biggest closet of all these days. Perhaps you are still the smiling go-getter everyone else sees and thinks you are. Perhaps this bipolar thing is temporary or a joke. But you’re not laughing.

Things deteriorate. Not leaving the house turns into “a thing.” Anxiety, panic attacks, the whole deal. You stop working. You start making bad decisions and staying up through the night again. You’re erratic. Impulsive. Possibly even hallucinating or delusional. Are you really being followed?

You stop driving. You stop taking the train.

You stop caring about anything and everything.

You start to think everyone would be better off without you. You feel broken and unfixable, so why go through it all? Why? Things are hopeless. You begin to feel numb or dead inside, so you drink or take drugs, or hurt yourself just to feel something. You think you deserve to be scarred or bruised on the outside to match your damaged insides. You contemplate the ways in which you might find release from the torment of this life.

Then you see your perfect little daughter, your partner, your mother or your friend, and you remember you are not alone. You think of how much your actions affect others. You start to feel guilty for even having the thoughts, which only makes you feel worse.

Frustration. Anger. Guilt. Shame. Sadness. Repeat...

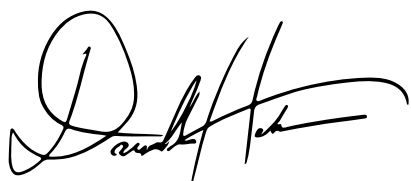
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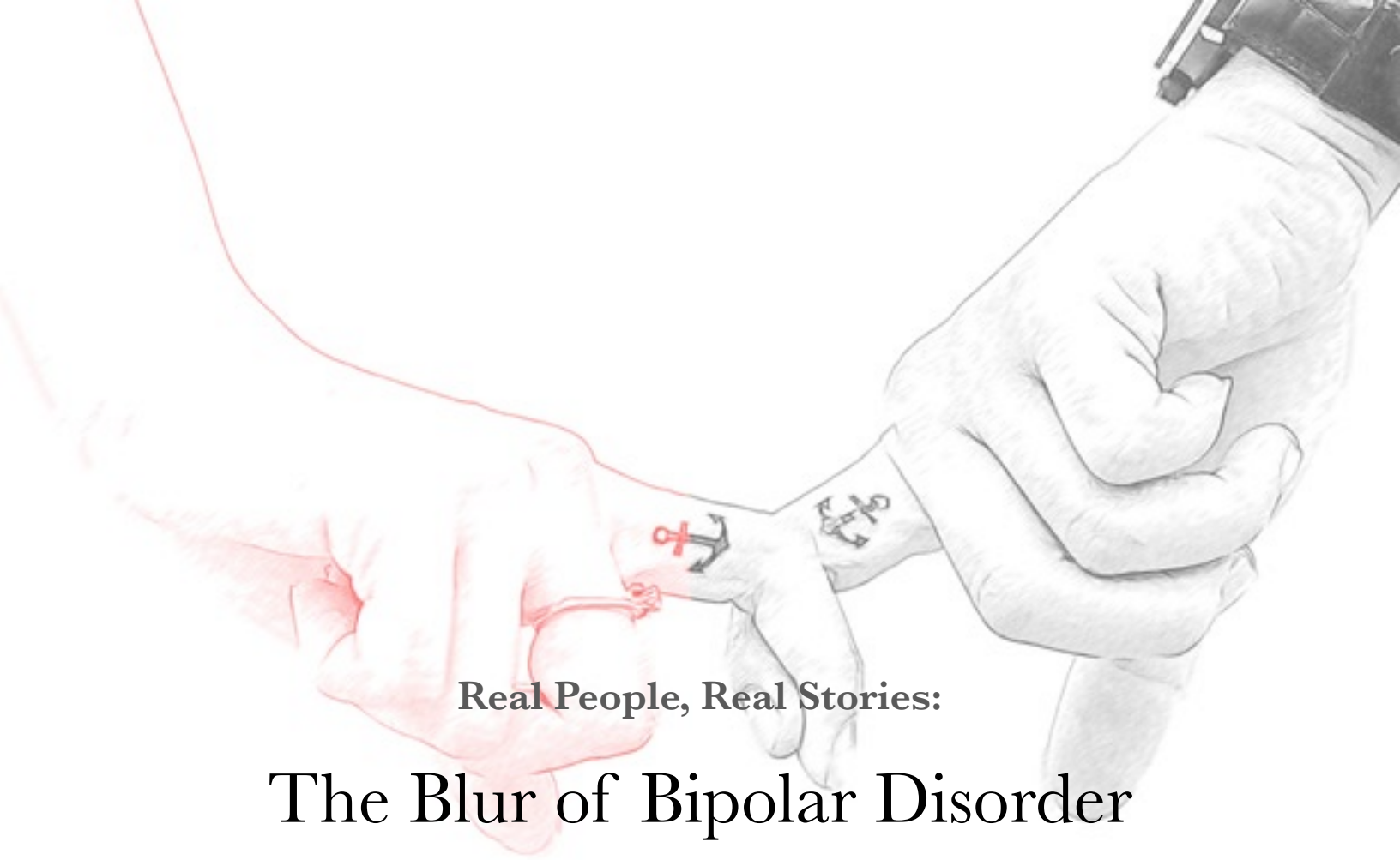
Then comes the psychoanalysis and everything else they throw at you — dietary changes, magnetic and shock therapy, hospitalizations, more meds... You see modest if any results. You’re ready to throw in the towel, until one day something happens — you’re listening to Pandora while feeding your kid or walking the dog, when Sam Cooke comes on and sings to you... “It’s been too hard living but I’m afraid to die, ’cause I don’t know what’s up there beyond the sky. It’s been a long, a long time coming, but I know a change is gonna come, oh yes it will.”

You feel a shift, and realize you can choose to live. Or at least try. It's not easy. You've been flooded by emotional ups and downs, crying and then laughing maniacally, throwing things, feeling totally out of control. But in this moment, you finally realize that a change might possibly come. Not today, but some day. You were not given a death sentence. You can find a way to own your recovery, stop ignoring advice and stop hiding in that damn closet — take your meds, see your doctors and be more self-aware — you can actually take some control, and start moving in a positive direction. One baby step at a time.

You look around at the shambles your life has become, and you see there are still a few people in your life who find you worth fighting for, and perhaps you should try to fight through this for them, and maybe one day you will even do it for yourself. You are strong. You are capable. You are talented. You are worthy of a life worth living. A change will come.

So you get your butt out of bed and make a sandwich. It's a start.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "David H. H." with a stylized flourish at the end.



Real People, Real Stories:

The Blur of Bipolar Disorder

by

Fraser Speaks

I've always been the type of person who has trouble staying still. Constantly moving from one thing to the next, or at least wanting to. It's hard for me to make a decision because I can't choose just one thing or focus on one thing. And the worse things get, the faster I want to move. The less I want to slow down or stop or be quiet. I move as quickly as possible to the next job, the next bottle of wine, the next person, party, hobby. I can't even focus on a 20-minute television show for more than five minutes. I can't do what I love — reading or writing or digesting a film or a record because that would involve me being still and I can't be still because that means addressing what is happening. Admitting there is a problem. Realizing I'm once again broken. So I speed. I zig and I zag and I am

too much. I drink too much. I cry too much. I buy too much. I go as fast as I can for as long as I can until I can't do it anymore. Until I physically can't take another step. Until I can't feel too much anymore. Until I'm done.

Until I am broken and all I can manage now is to turn off all the lights and sleep and try and remember how I got to this point.

Because by this point all I can remember are blurs.

A blur of me sitting in my car in the rain and crying on the phone while my boyfriend tries to understand why I'm crying.

A blur of me huddled under the covers while my dog remains loyally cemented to the foot of my bed keeping watch.

A blur of me dashing out the door with nowhere to really go because I want to avoid talking about anything that matters with my roommate.

A blur of seeing my mom's name show up on the phone screen and turning it over so I can pretend I never saw the call.

I remember something about laughing but it's faint and I can't remember what was so funny. Something about music but none of the songs make me feel anything. Something about reading but nothing on the pages grabs my attention. Something about nature but I don't want to leave my bed. I drive over a bridge and for a moment imagine what it would be like to go over the side. Would it hurt? Would I feel something, anything?

And then I'm in a long abandoned antique mall's parking lot screaming and choking because I wished it would actually happen. That it would all be over. That I would maybe feel something when I hit the water. But I also don't want to feel anything or think about anything ever again.

I want everyone to leave me alone, but I sob when I think my wish might actu-

ally come true. I dream about being surrounded by people and all of them hate me. I dream about everyone I love leaving me and screwing me over. I wake up screaming and scared and shaking. Most of all I wake up angry. I carry this anger around. I wrap myself in it. My journal becomes a scribble of messy, heavy bits of prose and lyrics. I'm angry with myself for letting this happen again and I want everyone to be angry with me, too. I want to feel something, anything. I stand outside in just a t-shirt. I can see my breath but I'm not cold. I still don't feel anything. And then all of a sudden I realize I'm sitting on my bed while my roommate sits on one of the numerous mounds of clothes that cover my floor.

“This is the lowest I've seen you.”

I get lunch with my mom.

“You just don't seem like your usual sweet self.”

I'm listening again.

Everything is coming back into focus.

I talk on the phone with my boyfriend and don't spend the entire time in tears.

“I love you.”

And I believe him.

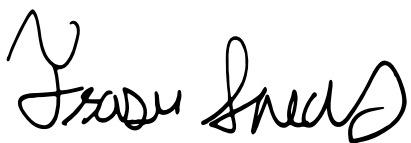
I return texts and phone calls. I sing in the car. I read. I sit on a bench for an hour enjoying how the sun feels hot on my face. I walk outside and shiver because of the cold.

I get up at 7 a.m. and eat a bagel. I spend time deliberately, delicately picking out what to wear. I'm being put back together. But I'm still not there.

The pieces are settling back together. I am settling. I feel quiet inside and I don't mind.

I stop trying to pack my days full of things one right after the other. I am caught off guard by the scars, but I have a hard time recalling exactly how they got there and am grateful that was a blur. I am grateful because the monsters that terrified me in my dreams were just that — fantastical monsters. I am grateful that though they don't understand why I can't pick myself up or crawl out of bed they want to and they try. I am grateful because while he doesn't understand why, he holds me while my mind moves too fast and everything is just too loud. I am grateful because while she doesn't understand why, she shares a pint of ice cream and her couch with me while I talk until I have nothing left to say and then it's OK if I don't say anything at all. I am grateful because they do understand, at least a little.

I am grateful because they know how it's going to end and still they stand by patiently, so very close, waiting to push me back up again and again.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Jason Sneed". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial "J" and "S".



Real People, Real Stories:

Dear Future Boyfriend, From a Girl With Bipolar Disorder

by
Shelby Manoukian

Dear future boyfriend,

There's only so many times I can sneakily take pills in front of you without you noticing. At brunch when our friends are taking selfies, or at dinner when you've gotten up to go to the bathroom.

Or what about when someone asks me to take a shot of vodka with them? I don't want to say, "No, because my antidepressants mixed with booze will make me black out."

Or when you spend the night with me for the first time, and I desperately try to hide all of my medications under my bed in hopes you don't see them.

I don't know how to tell you that I was diagnosed with bipolar II, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder at 23. I was away at school, and never felt more alone than I did in that moment sitting in my car out side of the psychiatrist office, looking down at a looming list of prescriptions with funny names, to treat an illness I had only ever heard bad things about.

A million questions — like, when do you tell a significant other about it? Do my friends find me exhausting? Are my parents embarrassed? Are people afraid of me? Will anyone ever accept me for what I am? — have paraded endlessly through my mind since. All I've craved is acceptance. But how could I ask for acceptance when I'm so afraid to admit I have mental illness? So I've lied to my bosses about doctor appointments, lied to my friends when I lose weight, faked illnesses like the flu when I'm actually so depressed I can't even get out of bed.

By nature I'm energetic and outgoing, but I can rarely keep this facade going for longer than a week before I get pulled down by my illness. Sometimes I just want to be alone, and other times I need so much encouragement and reassurance from my friends as I fall apart. In the same week, I can love my life with my whole heart, and then wish it was over.

Let's pretend you meet me in a local restaurant, and you ask me out. What am I supposed to do? Say, "Just so you know, I have bipolar type II — can you pass the butter?" as we sit down for our first date? Is there really ever an ideal way to drop news like that? My illness does not define who I am, but it does matter to some people.

But this is me, take it or leave it. If you do decide to continue this relationship with me, I have a couple requests:

1. If I'm having a really rough week at work, know what brightens my mood. Buy my sunflowers and take me for a hike. Since I can't really go out and drink the working gal blues away, I need you to be my drink.

2. If I'm having trouble getting out of bed, understand this is my depression. Don't let me isolate — make me breakfast and eat it in bed with me.

3. If I wake you up in the middle of the night from tossing and turning and crying out because of nightmares, don't tell me to wake up and stop. Just hold me a little bit tighter.

4. If I'm grumpy or saying hurtful things to you for no apparent reason, tell me I'm being hurtful and let me apologize.

5. If I'm losing too much weight, tell me I look beautiful no matter what size I am.

6. When I question my existence in this life, show me how life would be if I wasn't here. Tell me I should stay.

7. Cheer for the little victories. Make a big deal out of them.

8. Never give up on me.

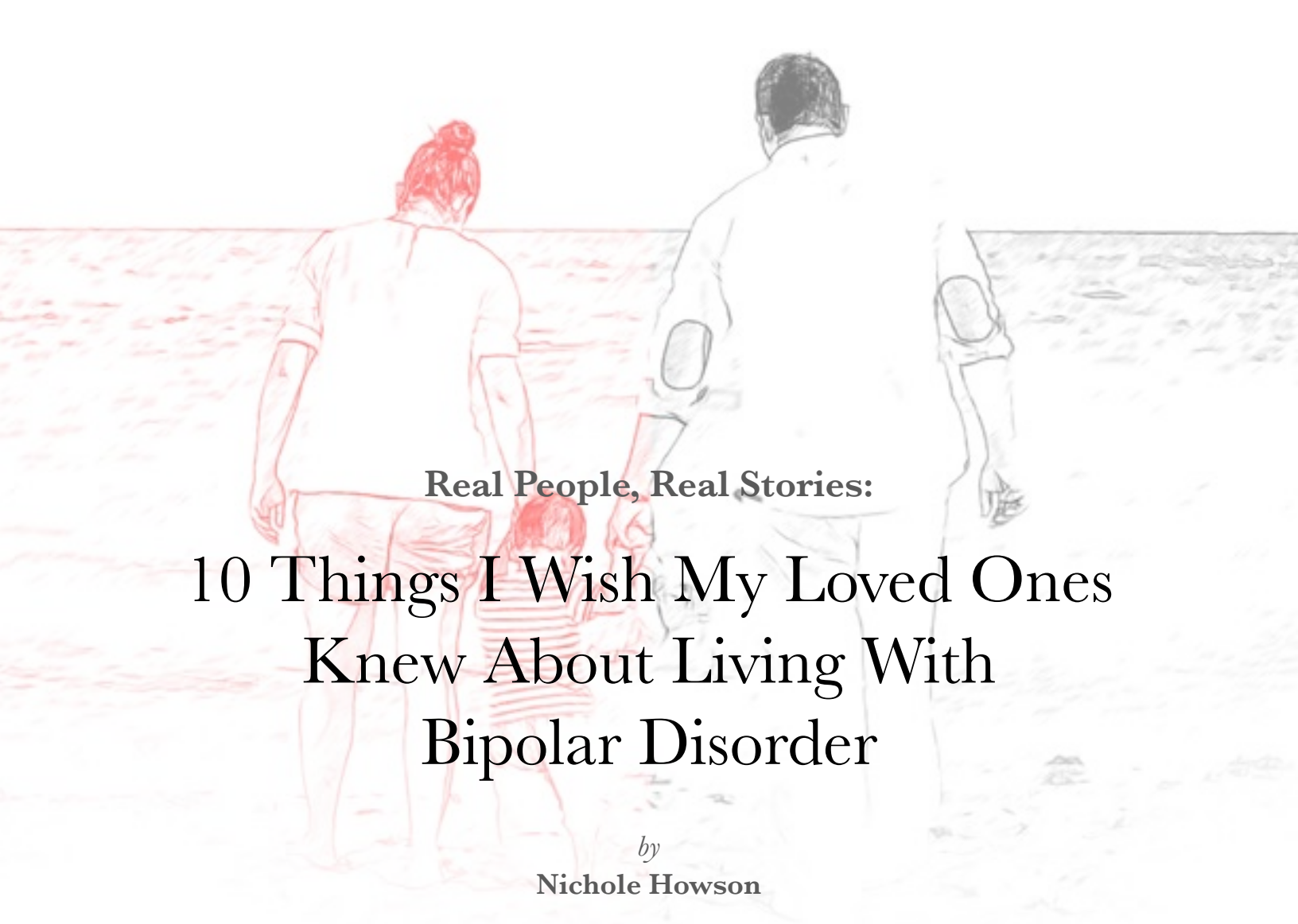
If you don't understand mental illness, just know it's not your fault. I've tirelessly fought through my recovery, and I've done it alone because even though it's so hard, I know I'm worth it. Being rejected because of a chemical imbalance is quite possibly the most humiliating experience. Dealing with nightmares, night sweats, reactions to medication, numerous doctors, therapists, while maintaining a full-time job, is actually pretty damn hard, and we are doing the best we can.

Just know that rooting for me, supporting me when I'm broken and loving me when I'm unlovable is the best gift I could ever receive.

Sincerely,

Shelby

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Shelby Jean Manakian". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, decorative initial "S" and "M".



Real People, Real Stories:

10 Things I Wish My Loved Ones Knew About Living With Bipolar Disorder

by
Nichole Howson

To my loved ones who don't understand my bipolar disorder,

It's been a year since I've been diagnosed with bipolar disorder. The past year, through my hard times, my recovery and my newfound strength, some people have struggled to understand me and what I'm going through. This is me trying. This is me telling you what I wish you understood about my mental illness.

1. “Bipolar disorder is not something I’ve made up.”
I didn’t make up bipolar disorder to excuse my bad decisions. Bipolar disorder has a medical definition, and it’s very real.

2. “It’s not fun when I’m manic.”
I’m a young adult who takes pride in being able to get good grades, run a business and pay my bills. There’s nothing more frustrating than coming out of a manic episode to find my credit card has several hundred charges to it, or that I missed some major deadlines for school.

3. “I’m not giving up.”
I want you to know no matter how far I fall, I’ll always climb back up. I’m determined to live a successful life. I won’t give up, so please, don’t give up on me.

4. “When I forget things I’m not just being neglectful.”
When I say I can’t remember something, it’s not me being neglectful or choosing not to remember. Sometimes things are harder to remember. I don’t know why, but believe me, it’s not by choice.

5. “When I cry, I’m not looking for attention.”
I’m not even looking for sympathy. I cry because I’m tired of fighting with myself. I cry to release the stress, anger and frustration I carry within. I cry because I know when I’m done, I’ll get back up and keep pushing through.

6. “I’m sincerely sorry when I snap at you.”
It’s not on purpose and it isn’t a choice. I wish I could control my outbursts, but when I’m in a bad place I lose control of those things. Know I will come back to you to apologize every single time.

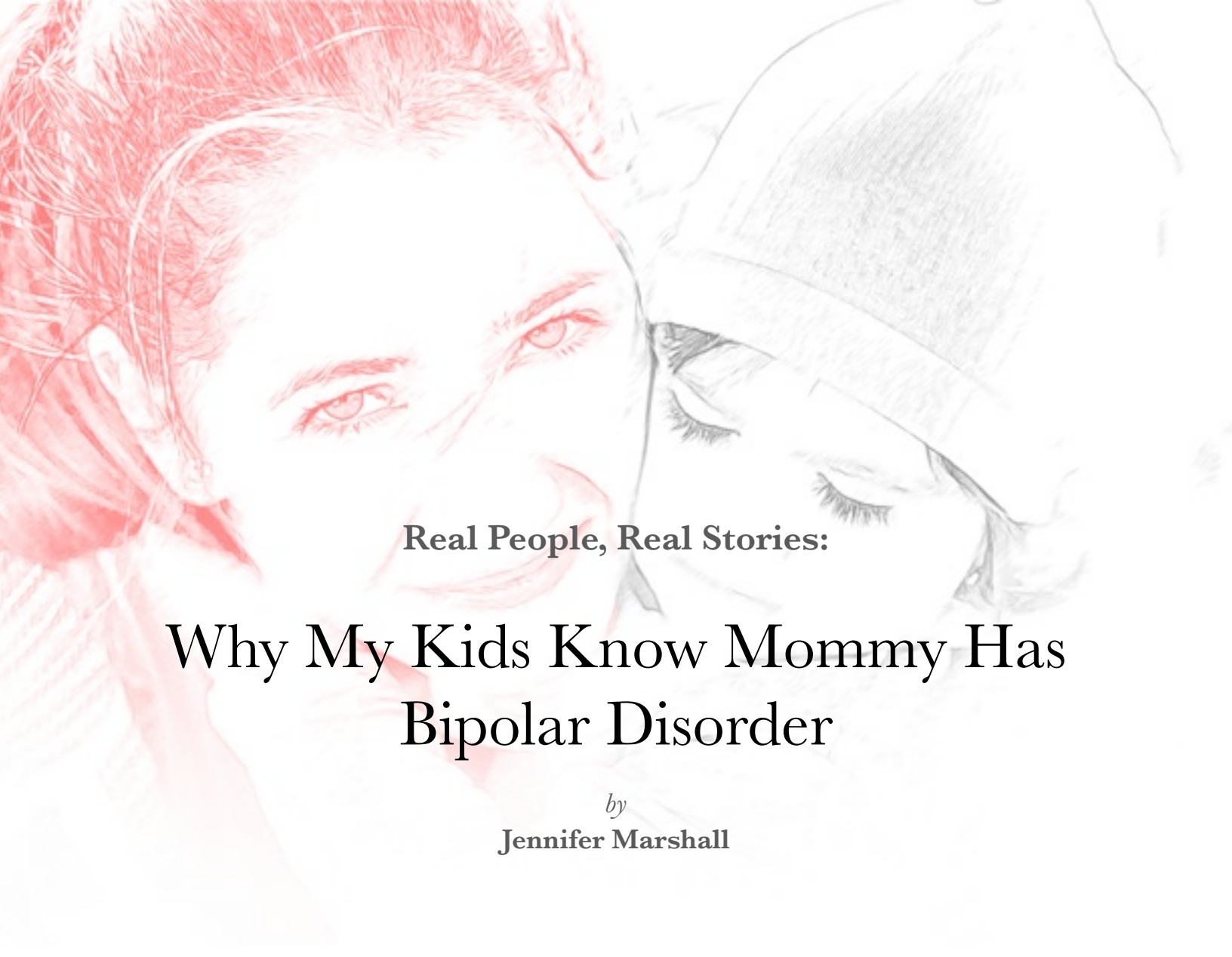
7. “There are days when the stress of life is just too much.”
This doesn’t make me weak. Please understand my disorder makes dealing with stress much more difficult. I might need help with things you feel are simple.

8. “I’m trying.”
You might not see it on the days it’s 4 in the afternoon and I’m still in my pajamas, but if I’m out of bed and being semi-productive, I’ve won a huge inward battle.

9. “I still look for your approval.”
Despite my disorder, I’m constantly trying to be the girl you once knew.

10. “I will always love you.”
Even if you don’t understand my disorder, what I’m going through or why I am the way I am, I will always love you. You have been there for me since the day I was born, and I cannot imagine how my life would be without you.

Nichole Houston



Real People, Real Stories:

Why My Kids Know Mommy Has Bipolar Disorder

by

Jennifer Marshall

We don't have a plan.

Chances are it will happen again. Mania will overtake my brain to the point where I'll need to be forced into treatment. No matter how hard I work at staying mentally healthy, the statistics show that most people who live with my type of bipolar will relapse. This can be due to meds ceasing to work, life events or changes in sleep patterns.

We probably should write down a plan.

That was the advice given to us as we sat in a dreary office speaking with a new psychiatrist one month before I would give birth to our first child. My entire pregnancy had gone so smoothly. My bipolar disorder appeared to be in remission as I indulged in ice cream every night and marveled at my growing belly. I was so happy with how our life was going.

So when my husband Ben and I met with the psychiatrist, I naturally wasn't focused on preventative measures. Frankly, I was questioning whether I even had bipolar given how well I had been doing off medication. The meeting was meant for us to have someone in our back pocket should we need her in an emergency. My ego ached for her to shower me with praise for how well I had been taking care of myself.

Instead, she focused on the inevitable hospitalization she predicted I'd face. That's all I heard. "You're going to fail at mothering with bipolar, so we need a plan for when that happens."

Well, f*ck you, lady.

Ben didn't have the same visceral reaction I did. He told me later that he thought it was good she was preparing us to be prepared. We may not have had a plan written down when we left her office that afternoon, but at least we had her card.

Eight weeks later my husband was frantically dialing her number as I frantically reorganized our kitchen. I had been getting by on tiny bits of sleep ever since our son was born, and my brain was starting to unravel. I was unable to sleep. Napping when the baby fell asleep during the day simply wasn't happening. At night I'd get a few hours here or there, but waking up four to five times a night with a newborn was not conducive to my brain getting any real rest.

So it went haywire.

I could feel the sand in the hourglass beginning to slip through. I began gathering all of my journals which held the glimpses of my story since the initial

diagnosis two years prior — piling them all in front of the blazing gas fireplace in our family room as an offering of my legacy. Standing near the flames, I felt the heat build against the back of my legs. In my mind I'd rather go to hell than back to the mental hospital, so why not get a jump on the journey?

I had postpartum psychosis when my son was 4 weeks old. I knew it was coming on from the moment I first held him, but I was too afraid to tell anyone. I was terrified of my thoughts, and yet, even more fearful of saying something. They might take my baby from me.

Thank God my husband didn't share my same fears. He was anything but afraid of reaching out for help when he realized my mental health had severely deteriorated. He immediately picked up the phone, as painful as I'm sure it was for him. He was my lifeline.

I heard the kids arguing because they couldn't agree on a show to watch while I got ready for the day. There was no compromising and so I took the privilege away. Arguing ensued, followed by a whole lot of yelling — ugly, horrible, rage-filled yelling on my part. I yelled with fury at my young children, something I am utterly ashamed to admit. That's when it happened.

“I'm going to get rid of you, Mommy!” my son threatened, still in his jammies, with all the power and might of his little 4-and-a-half-year-old voice. Just when I thought it couldn't get any worse, it did.

“Oh, really? How are you going to do that, bud?” I retorted as I pulled my sweater over my head.

“I'll put you in the trash can!” he screamed as hot tears spilled down his cheeks.

I could feel his anger squeeze my heart and wring it out. I had become so worthless to him that he wanted to throw me away. I couldn't blame him. If I had myself for a mommy, I'd probably want to throw her away, too.

I knew in that moment that I was failing him as a parent. He and his sister

didn't deserve to be on the receiving end of my raging temper. There was no way I was going to continue to expose them to my hurtful, cruel, pathetic attempt at discipline. I knew I needed to learn to parent them differently so that their memories of childhood weren't fraught with what I considered this nightmarish scene that I wished I could erase.

Right then and there, in my mind, silently to myself I vowed to make some serious changes. I'd find ways to control my anger. I'd learn how to cope. I'd try harder to manage the symptoms of my illness so they didn't tear my family apart. I finished getting dressed and then got down on my knees and pulled him to me, wrapping him with all that I had left. I cried with him, and we both whispered over and over again our vows to stop fighting and yelling. Baby girl timidly walked over with open arms and joined in on our big hug.

This is where the healing begins. I dropped them off at school and came home to start writing. There's something about taking pen to paper, taking the time to write out what happened, that helps me to understand how to do things better next time.

The kids are 7 and almost 5 now, and there are still days when I wish I were better at controlling my emotions. But that morning three years ago was a huge wake-up call for me. I've learned that self-care does wonders for keeping my rage in check. Rage is a symptom of my illness, that, because of my commitment to taking better care of myself, doesn't pop up all that often anymore. I'm the first to admit I'm not a perfect parent or wife or friend, by any means. I'm human and I'm flawed. It's the ability to forgive myself and apply the knowledge gained from mistakes that makes me the mother, spouse and friend I'm proud to be.

Now, I talk with my kids about my mental illness often. They know Mommy has bipolar disorder.

They know I take medicine every day to keep my brain healthy. They know Mom needs to get good sleep to be a good mommy (don't we all, parents?). I talk with them about how I'm helping people who live with mental illness to share their stories through my non-profit. I'm teaching my children that it's OK to talk

about mental illness the same way people talk about other medical conditions. My son knows there are illnesses he can see, like his classmate's broken arm, ensconced inside a bright blue cast, and that there are illnesses he can't see, like his Poppy's heart condition and his mommy's bipolar.

Someday I'll tell them about the time our son was 4 weeks old and an ambulance and several police cars showed up at our house, and I was handcuffed and taken away from my baby for a week.

Someday I'll tell them about how I was so over the moon about our second pregnancy that I barely slept for a week. Instead of rest coming at the end of a long day taking care of a toddler, I'd lie in bed for hours after kissing my son goodnight.

Someday I'll tell them how my daughter was just a 5-week-old embryo in my belly when she and I were admitted to the psych ward.

For now, we talk about it in spurts. Like when my little girl fetches the mail and my Lithium prescription arrives. I remind them that my medicine keeps me healthy. I've shown them the bottle and the pills to teach them that medicine is not candy. When I have a bad day and my patience wears thin, causing me to yell a little too nasty at their misbehavior, I know that I'm in need of a time-out. Those are the times when I realize I haven't been mindful of my self-care, and so I get back on track and take some time to myself. Doing so helps me to be the mommy I want to be for them.

There may come a day when I recognize mental illness in one of my kids. I'm not afraid. I know we'll get through it together. I hope that if they ever suspect it in themselves before I do, they'll have had enough exposure to mental illness to know how to reach out for help. And they can rest assured that their father and I will do everything in our power to get them the treatment they need to get well.

With this strength, armed with the knowledge of a decade's worth of experience managing my bipolar illness, it's about time I write that plan. For my kids. For my husband. For myself.



Real People, Real Stories:

Psychosis Isn't Shameful, It's a Symptom

by
Charlie Kaplan

Psychosis can be a component of bipolar disorder (and other illnesses), but it is not addressed as often as other symptoms like mania or depression. Due to the nature of the symptoms of psychosis, discussion of this topic may be discouraged due to fear of judgment or ridicule. Often those who experience psychosis are viewed in a negative light, but psychosis is a symptom of a disease — just as pain is a symptom of a heart attack. By keeping this symptom tucked away in the dark, or maintaining the negativity towards psychosis, the stigma surrounding it festers and intensifies.

Psychosis looks different for each person who experiences it. Some may hear

voices or sounds that are not real, while others may have bouts of extreme paranoia and believe someone is out to get them. According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness, the two major symptoms of psychosis are hallucinations and delusions. Hallucinations can involve seeing, hearing, smelling or feeling things that aren't there. You may hear voices, feel something touching you or see a visual manifestation of something that isn't real. Delusions are beliefs that are not true and are often irrational. Psychosis is common in mania, but it can also happen during depressive episodes.

I have experienced psychosis in both mania and depression. When I was younger, undiagnosed and lacked insight into my symptoms, my hallucinations were incredibly frightening and grew out of control. I would hear screams, scratching and other disturbing sounds. As an adult I have been able to manage them better by doing all I can to stabilize my mood and maintain balance. Medication helps me limit the number of psychotic episodes, or lessens the severity of them. As long as I take my medication as prescribed, I've experienced good results. When I'm not in the most extreme level of mania or depression, insight into my symptoms remains somewhat intact because I've learned what the symptoms are and how to look for them. I still have bouts where I lack insight, but for the most part I have managed to control the degree to which I experience psychosis by paying closer attention to my symptoms on a daily basis.

Escalation of hallucinations can depend on the type — such as auditory or visual — and how irrational they are. With auditory hallucinations, when it is apparent it is not real (such as hearing a voice in the same room when I know I am home alone), and I'm still thinking clearly, I do not respond. Usually this stops the hallucination from continuing. In the past, I've gotten caught up in the situation, which makes it worse. This may not work for everyone, but I have found ignoring the hallucination to be beneficial.

I still have episodes of full-blown psychosis at times, but I try to keep myself grounded and attempt to remember what can or cannot be real. Still, sometimes these symptoms seem realistic and that makes differentiating between hallucinations and reality more complicated. It is important to extend some grace towards yourself. Perfection is impossible.

Delusions can be harder to fight. Your entire thinking changes and supports the delusion. It compounds inside your head and spins out of control quickly. If I start to have false beliefs – and there is even a hint of doubt that it is true – I talk about it with someone I trust in order to get an outside perspective. This helps me sort out when I'm having delusions or when I'm being rational. Hoarding that information and entertaining those thoughts only makes it worse.

Psychosis is just another part of the disease, and it can be controlled, just like other symptoms of bipolar disorder. For me, medication and lifestyle changes help to control mood, which also controls episodes of psychosis. Some examples of lifestyle changes I implemented include getting adequate sleep, keeping a schedule, avoiding substances and taking my medication as prescribed. I also avoid forms of entertainment that may trigger hallucinations, such as depictions of graphic violence. I do all I can so I don't overload myself, and I keep track of my symptoms so I can see an episode coming.

There is a tendency to glamorize mental illness in films and television, and psychosis is no exception. To experience a psychotic episode is not artistic, glamorous or fun. It is emotionally draining and can be horribly frightening, depending on how it manifests.

Perhaps we will reach a point where discussion of psychosis isn't taboo or shameful. While it is poorly understood by much of society, maybe continued awareness of bipolar disorder and all of its symptoms will lessen the stigma associated with psychosis.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Charlie Kaplan". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long horizontal line extending from the end of the name.

Authors



Suzy Favor Hamilton

Suzy Favor Hamilton is a three-time Olympian, seven-time U.S. National Champion and record nine-time NCAA champion runner. She is also a wife, mother and author of the New York Times best-selling memoir, “[Fast Girl – A Life Spent Running From Madness](#),” which details her life of anxiety, depression and mania hiding behind the façade of the all-American girl.



Madelyn Heslet

Madelyn is a 24-year-old single mother of a beautiful 1-year-old genius. She enjoys coffee, maxi skirts, scary movies and long naps. She’s currently trying to break into the blogging world and help break the stigma of mental illness. She battles bipolar I disorder, borderline personality disorder, postpartum depression and ADHD.



Emily Stainton

Emily Noel Stainton Garcia's mother is Colombian and her dad is Hungarian. She grew up immersed in a lot of the Colombian culture, and she's extremely proud of that. She is 19 years old and goes to school for early childhood education. She loves working with kids and wants to influence the lives of the next generation in a positive way. She has a very supportive family and is grateful for the love and support in her life. She's also thankful for the support of her friends and boyfriend.



Steve Imperato

Steve Imperato is a successful "9-to-5-er" who spends considerable time dreaming about how to be a successful "Non-9-to-5-er". Writing and thinking are serious hobbies, as is dealing with rapid cycling bipolar and a smattering of other maladies, which may or may not include a deep obsession with basketball. The intersection of all those points can be followed at [Tao of X](#).



Danielle Hark

Danielle Hark is a wellness writer, professional photographer and certified life coach whose work has been featured in The Huffington Post, Psychology Today, Dr. Oz's YouBeauty and Beliefnet, as well as various books. Danielle is a mental health advocate, and the founder and director of the non-profit [Broken Light Collective](#), which empowers people living with or affected by mental illness using photography. For more information, visit www.daniellehark.com, follow her on Instagram at [daniellehark](#) and on Twitter [@DanielleHark](#).



Fraser Sepaks

Fraser is a 25-year-old struggling with bipolar II, major depressive disorder, self-harm and general anxiety. She hopes that her writing will help to change the stigma of mental illness.



Shelby Manoukian

Shelby is a California girl working in the Napa Valley wine industry. She loves animals and food.



Nichole Howson

Nichole is a Marketing Graduate and has a certificate in Christian Ministries as well. She runs a website called [Defying Shadows](#) that challenges the stigma of mental illness and encourages those affected by mental health concerns and other struggles. Nichole also runs a [social media marketing](#) company and manages a team of freelancers. In her spare time, Nichole volunteers for non-profits consulting and managing online marketing efforts. In the fall, she will begin teaching an online social marketing class for high school students.



Jennifer Marshall

Jennifer Marshall is the Executive Director of [This Is My Brave, Inc.](#), a 501(c)3 non-profit organization dedicated to ending the stigma surrounding mental illness by sharing true personal stories through poetry, essay and music. She writes at www.bipolarmomlife.com.



Charlie Kaplan

Charlie is a writer, artist and graduate student. She lives with bipolar I disorder and ADHD. She is the owner of two blogs where she discusses her diagnoses, [Decoding Bipolar](#) and [Accepting ADHD](#).

Resources

For more information about living with bipolar disorder:

- Visit the [International Bipolar Foundation](#) to get a list of [symptoms and causes](#) and [treatment options](#).
- To find a support group online or in your area, click [here](#).
- To download the International Bipolar Foundation’s ebook, “Healthy Living With Bipolar Disorder,” click [here](#).
- To read more stories about bipolar disorder, visit [The Mighty](#).

The **MIGHTY**

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