

My Experience with Bipolar Disorder

By Kim Brown

I woke up early this morning vividly recalling a dream I had the previous night. The main character was a racketeer, with his mobster entourage surrounding him. The kingpin wanted me dead and vowed, given the right opportunity, he would kill me. Void of any fear, I escaped by driving to a nearby town. Once I became fully awake, I realized this dream was an allegory for Major Depression Disorder, and that my survival was a threat to its defeat over me. I began to wonder if I'd always be chained to this savage beast called depression.

Major Depression is a part of Bipolar Disorder. It is a life-consuming, heinous monster gripping you in its shark-like teeth, refusing to release you from its vicious, debilitating grip. While my depressive episodes tend to last roughly a week, it intensifies each day that I am able to survive one hellish 24-hour period after another. Life deteriorates to a desperate struggle for survival. It seems the only way to find relief is to admit defeat and begin the deep descent into the tomb where a cold, dark bed is waiting. Depression is like a dense cloud slowly descending upon you until you are completely surrounded by total blackness, with no possible escape. The intensity of these nightmare attacks increase with each successive episode. Once you are released from the steel trap of depression and return to life in the normal world, it's difficult to even imagine how terrible it was. But, as you begin to recall how close you came to succumbing to this monster and ending it all, you do remember.

I like to think of myself as a well-adjusted, healthy individual who contributes to society. However, when I am afflicted with this malady, I feel only the opposite to be true. Having Bipolar Disorder, I have to fight for my health, happiness, and even my very existence. I experience life differently than other people. I experience both extreme highs and extreme lows. My usual state of mind is more elevated and sharper, and my down periods leave in their wake an aftermath that those without Bipolar Disorder will never intimately know or understand.

My most recent episode with Major Depression was the worst to date, yet I refuse to be a helpless, defeated victim, sacrificed on the altar of death to this all-consuming monster. Perhaps there is a way to fight back, resisting instead of passively surrendering and being held captive like a wounded animal. Currently, I am not capable of freeing myself from its seductive siren song as it draws me into the vacant grave that awaits me. I am dependent on external forces, family, and friends to help release me from its clutches.

Despite the many disadvantages of being forced to live life through repeated episodes of major depression and mania, I am keenly aware of the abundance of positive character traits that I possess. I know I have an expanding capacity for creative endeavors, a unique and heightened sensitivity to the world around me, and a passion and deep appreciation for intelligence, art and beauty expressed on all levels and in various mediums.

Regardless of my favorable attributes, I can't help but wonder if I am an endless burden to those I love (my family and my intimate, inner circle of friends). I fear others will always view me as damaged goods. Will they see me as emotionally impaired, mentally ill, and too peculiar to be accepted as normal like they are? Will I always be someone on the outside looking in?

Thank God there are "communities" for people like myself, where we feel like we genuinely fit in, where people fully understand and accept us even in our darkest moments. These groups are like a weekly visit to a deep well of fresh spring water where we can drink unabashedly and without restraint. We gently wash each other's wounds, and apply healing balms.

I suppose the average person is concerned, to a certain extent, with how others view them. I think people feel especially aware of scrutiny when they are out in public and, therefore, choose to act appropriately. But those of us who are afflicted with Bipolar Disorder are incapable of putting on an act when depression bares its evil, serpent's head. Isolation is the common coping strategy we employ to prevent humiliating ourselves in public. We're not strong enough to control our emotions and hold back the tears, and we can't hide our pain. We end up looking and feeling miserable. One of the first things to deteriorate is our daily routine, and this affects our hygiene and physical appearance. Do I risk going out in public and disgracing myself in this pathetic state, or do I stay home and hide, protecting myself and others from this weakened and fragile state?

When I am finally released from the throes of depression, enjoying friends again and life in general, in the back of my mind echoes the uncertainty of how long it will be before I am tormented again. I will probably never be completely free from depression's leviathan tentacles. Like an unwelcome guest, it arrives unannounced and remains far too long before being forced to finally leave. Once I am free, I feel total relief and release. It feels so wonderful to once again be healthy and whole, drinking in all the beauty around me and experiencing all that life has to offer. But, not far from the surface is the nagging feeling that my freedom is temporary, and I wonder how long it will be until I am once again plagued by this disorder. Nevertheless, as long as there is life within me, there is always the chance for hope and happiness. I am resolved that I will never allow this heartless, ravenous beast to overtake, consume, and destroy my life. I am determined to fight with every fiber of my being to overcome this hideous, parasitic monster, and I will continue to choose life over death.