

# Bipolar and Me

By Maya

You start dying slowly  
if you do not travel,  
if you do not read,  
If you do not listen to the sounds of life,  
If you do not appreciate yourself.

You start dying slowly when you kill your self-esteem,  
when you do not let others help you.

You start dying slowly If you become a slave to your habits,  
walking everyday on the same paths ... If you do not change your  
routine,

If you do not wear different colors or you do not speak to those you  
don't know.

You start dying slowly If you avoid to feel passion & it's turbulent  
emotions, those that make your eyes glisten & your heart beat fast.  
You start dying slowly If you do not change your life when you are not  
satisfied with your job, or with your love, or with your surroundings.

If you do not risk what is safe for the uncertain,

If you do not go after a dream,  
If you do not allow yourself,  
at least once in your lifetime  
to run away from sensible advice.

~ Pablo Neruda

Hi. My name is Maya. I'm a 41 year old single mum, a dental surgeon and owner of 2 successful dental practices. I have Bipolar.

I started writing my story in 2014, after my 2nd suicide attempt. Originally, it was only as part of my therapy, almost like vomiting when you feel sick to feel better afterwards, but then the more I wrote, the more I wanted to write. I felt the need to find purpose in my suffering as a means of dealing with it better. And that is why I decided to dedicate my story to everyone; everyone who, like me, does not just suffer with bipolar disorder, and the trail of destruction it leaves behind in our own lives and the lives of those around us, but everyone who suffers with mental illness. I don't want any of you to feel as lonely as I have for most of my life. I'm also writing this for the family and friends that suffer with us; those who often carry on supporting us regardless. In writing this I also give thanks to the professional people that have helped me slowly piece my life back together again; my psychiatrist, my community psychiatric nurse, who's become a friend and confidant, the duty team and all the staff at Milbrook psychiatric unit. Last, but not least, I hope to get the message across to everyone with preconceived ideas, or a lack of knowledge and understanding of bipolar disorder or mental illness in general. I want to give you a small glimpse into our lives, so you will hopefully come to understand better, to raise awareness for others and have empathy without judgement. I beg that you listen with the purpose of trying to understand, instead of listening with the intention of replying or criticizing, because what we experience is VERY, VERY real....

WebMD gives the definition and symptoms of Bipolar disorder, formerly called manic depression, as: "...a mental illness that brings severe high and low moods and changes in sleep, energy, thinking, and behavior." It carries on to explain that: "People who have bipolar disorder can have periods in which they feel overly happy and energized and other periods of feeling very sad, hopeless, and sluggish. In between those periods, they usually feel normal. You can think of the highs and the lows as two 'poles' of mood, which is why it's called 'bipolar' disorder. The word "manic" describes the times when someone with bipolar disorder feels overly excited and confident. These feelings can also involve irritability and impulsive or reckless decision-making. About half of people during mania can also have delusions (believing things that aren't true and that they can't be talked out of) or hallucinations (seeing or hearing things that aren't there)."

I do believe that if you take the time and trouble to study the brain's anatomy, how it functions chemically, physiologically and biologically, as well as how the different mood stabiliser medications, prescribed to treat Bipolar disorder successfully, work pharmacologically, you will find that this is as much a physical illness as any other that you can see the clinical signs of. It is triggered and exacerbated by anything that can disturb the chemical balance in our brains, such as traumatic events, stress, a lack of sleep, excessive alcohol consumption or use of recreational drugs. Having said this, it is important to also acknowledge that everyone's perceptions are different and what one person may experience as stress or trauma, another may not.

No two people are alike and I'm sure that people living with bipolar disorder all have different experiences of this destructive mental illness. I can only share my own. For those who have preconceptions, don't understand, or think it's nonsense, I challenge you to go and do a bit of homework before you judge. Then, be grateful that you have been spared, because the emotional torture it drags its victims through is worse than any physical pain I have personally experienced in all of my life, and that includes being in labour for more than 24 hours with my first child, waiting 5 hours in A&E with a broken hip without pain relief and an elbow cut open to the bone having fallen onto a glass bowl. I can carry on if you doubt me. It's really the only thing that has ever managed to rob me of every rational thought and feeling, has made me feel so unbearably lonely, misunderstood, overwhelmingly sad, torn apart, afraid, hopeless, worthless, ashamed, anxious, lost, paranoid, numb inside and completely detached from reality, so much so that I wanted to be dead. The constant rushing thoughts, the flashing violent and sexual images and demons chasing me when I close my eyes, the nightmares that left me panting in cold sweat for nights in a row, the panic attacks that caused my heart to race and my whole body to shake, making me want to run away from everyone and myself, and the hallucinations of things floating round in my room and coming at me. To me, it has been like a monster that searched and found every little bit of life

inside of me and tried to squeeze it out until I couldn't breathe. It has clawed and scraped at my soul until my heart was an aching, torn piece of raw meat in my chest.



I want to stress that none of us can be called "a bipolar"; the same as someone suffering from heart disease, cannot be called "a heart disease". We are not a "thing". It is an illness we suffer from, more like a "thing" we carry inside of us and have to live with. We are human beings with personalities, feelings and needs like everyone else. There has been the theory for a long time that, due to a deficiency in our brains, we just lack the right kinds and levels of chemicals that affect how well balanced we feel, and that our moods differ from the normal "ups-and-downs" that everyone else experiences.

It is important for me to explain that I don't believe in blaming my personality traits or any mistakes I've made in my life on other people, my circumstances, my illness or the act of hiding behind it. I believe that all of us have a dark and a light side. I acknowledge both my sides now, in addition to my illness and my limitations. I accept that I am very sensitive, emotional and highly strung, that I don't cope well under a lot of pressure, and due to my low self-esteem and feelings of total, utter incompetence as a human being, I have declined help and support in the past. I guess I always believed, as Earnest Hemmingway writes, that "courage is grace under pressure". Even now that I'm well I still have to cope with pressure and sometimes find it very difficult, but I try to minimise what causes me pressure and stress, and try to live a healthy lifestyle free from stimulants and drugs. I exercise daily, do meditation and relaxation exercises, make sure I get enough sleep, eat healthy and take my medication; thus taking responsibility for keeping myself as well as I possibly can. I take all the help and support I can get from family and friends. I see my psychiatrist regularly and my community psychiatric nurse on a weekly basis for talk therapy. I accept responsibility for the mistakes that I made in the past, and the relationships I destroyed when I did not seek help; and unfortunately I did not seek help for a long time.

I covered up, acted over it and self-medicated. Anything you can think of, I tried it, in an attempt to keep what was happening to me away from my family. I obsessively texted and emailed people I just met and barely knew. I went to visit people at homes I didn't know. My weight yo-yo'd between 9st and 13st. Sometimes I ate nothing and exercised excessively and other times I ate compulsively, didn't exercise and drank large amounts of alcohol every night to calm me down. I became obsessed with alternative holistic therapies such as Reiki, Reflexology and Bach Flower remedies. I became involved with everything New Age and all sorts of spiritualistic cults, went to see psychics, read self-help, philosophy and spiritual books, and practiced martial arts, yoga and meditation. I grasped at anything in the hope that it would make the noise in my head go quiet and the pain in my heart and soul go away. Although I still believe that these holistic therapies and natural means of relaxation and healing has a wonderful place within treatment programs and can be very beneficial, in my extreme states of mind nothing could "reach" me anymore. I was willing to try anything to release what was inside me, so that I could manage to act, in my eyes, "normal", and fulfill my roles sufficiently as a mother, a wife, a daughter, sister, friend and employer. But nothing helped to ease the emotional pain I experienced during my crippling "lows" and during my euphoric "highs". I felt invincible, irresistible, and beautiful, like a goddess with special powers and wisdom to perform healing miracles. I walked on high ledges and turned up at work over-excited

and covered in glitter. I became involved in inappropriate relationships with men I barely knew and had no regard for their families or my own. I destroyed my marriage and was on the verge of leaving my family to go and live a simple life with the Native American people, after I attended a talk by an old Indian Sage that convinced me that I needed to leave my family, because I raised his healing energy power and that our joined energies would save the world. I finally launched a serious attempt to end my life, not being able to cope with this thing inside me, or the thought of exposing other people to the destruction it caused. Only then, with my "mask" broken and finally having fallen off, was I ready to admit that I was not ok, that I needed long-term professional help if I didn't want to completely lose or destroy the people closest to me or end up dead myself. That was the day I put my ego to one side and asked for help.

Now that I have found my voice, I would like to share my story with you...



When I was little, my parents used to call me their "butterfly" child, too delicate and fragile to deal with this life. Even now when I close my eyes, in my mind's eye, I see myself as an almost translucent little girl, running in the sunshine and wind on a deserted beach by the shoreline with a small kite up in the air behind me. I was always watching birds flying high up in the sky, wishing I had wings like that and could fly far, far away; away from everything, everyone and away from myself and this heaviness inside me. To be free from it. My father used to own a small 4-seater Cessna airplane, and he would let me fly with him when I was eight years old. I loved it, because I suppose that was as close as I could get to flying like a bird. Even from a young age the lyrics of Toni Braxton's song, "One day I'll fly away", resonated with me.

I am the 2nd eldest of 4 children. I had a very strict upbringing and was always told to swallow my tears. I was a sickly, shy, nervous little girl, who felt alone, even when there were people around me. I always felt invisible and lost, like I didn't belong anywhere and that I wasn't good enough for anything or anyone. I don't really know why I felt like this; I just did. All I ever wanted was to be loved and accepted unconditionally, warts and all, and to fit and belong somewhere. I cried easily and often, I wet my bed, bit my nails, was afraid of the dark, had nightmares every night and ended up between my mum and dad in their bed most nights. We had cats and dogs and budgies; the same as everyone else. I played with my dollies, rode my bike with my brother, stuck my mums underskirts on my head and pretended I was a princess with long hair, baked mud cakes in the summerhouse, climbed fruit trees and was told off for coming home late with our clothes, hands, feet and mouths stained from blackberries; you know, the normal kind of things kids did. The two truly positive features of my life were our doggie, Fiedies, and my granddad (mum's dad). I loved my dog because he was my best friend, who loved me unconditionally, and I adored Grandad because I was his favourite and he made me feel like a princess. He used to call me his "blou-oog-krulkoppie"(blue-eyed-curly-head). He taught me how to put a fishing line, hook and sinker together and bait it myself, and used to take me fishing with him at 6am in the morning on the beach. He told me to read and read and read English books with a dictionary next to me so that I could look up the meaning of the words I didn't know, so as to increase my vocabulary. It was him who taught me that "procrastination" is the most important word in the world to remember. With them I belonged. But then they both died. My doggie was mauled by a pit-bull when I was five years old and Grandad "drowned" by heart failure when I was in grade five. Fiedies was brought home in a cardboard box, all torn apart, and Grandad vanished in front of my very eyes. Those two

events, and the fact that we moved house so many times, made me lose my sense of belonging again. I found change very difficult to cope with, so I hated moving house and moving schools and later moving countries. It made me feel so lost.

I did well enough at school, though. I played the piano, did ballet and gymnastics, played netball and ran really fast. I sang in choirs, performed at drama and joined the drum majorettes. I wasn't part of the "cool" crowd, but I had good friends. I guess my life was quite normal.

The only thing I have ever been very sure of in this life, even as very small child, was that I wanted and needed to help people. I believed that if I helped others, if I could make a difference, I would somehow find a sense of purpose, peace and worthiness; like a puzzle piece that fit into a specific place in a very large puzzle. This was the reason I ended up choosing my profession, so I might take a special interest in helping and showing kindness to people that were extremely nervous or phobic, or were fragile themselves or self-conscious about their appearance. And you know, people can tell when you really care. I chose to help them in a way where I could give plenty of myself. It was so rewarding in its own way to watch people change in front of your very eyes and be so appreciative.

I just forgot that when you give of yourself in that way, you need to draw the line somewhere and make sure that you stay mentally and emotionally well and strong. I didn't do either. My mum once said to me: "If you're ever asked in a work interview what your best and worst qualities are, you should reply, "My best is also potentially my worst." It didn't make sense to me at the time, but it does now, because what made me absolutely love my job for 18 years eventually made me hate it. Why? Because I became so mentally drained and exhausted from giving of myself and trying to fix people mentally, emotionally and spiritually, and absorbing all their fears that I ended up just empty. That was when I started thinking that I needed to consider stepping away from dentistry. It just wasn't making my heart sing anymore. I needed to find my purpose again. Like Dolly Parton said: "Find out who you are and do it on purpose." I came to realize that life is a never ending journey of self-discovery. I needed to ask myself the questions again: What am I all about, and what do I want to make me happy again? I still wanted to help people with my gifts and talents (that I was sure of), but not in the way that I had been. I did not wish to continue getting so terribly stressed and drained in the process of helping others. I needed to do some soul searching and make enough quiet time to relax and meditate to find out what I wished to do next.

When I was 6 years old, our school held a Spring Concert. As I was the only girl taking ballet classes, I was chosen to be the Spring Fairy that would wake all the flowers after the winter with her dance. On the night of the concert I felt so sick with stage fright, that when it was nearly time for me to go on, I realised that I had completely forgotten my whole dance! I burst into tears and went to find my teacher, who just reassured me that I would be ok. The next minute the curtain went up, I swallowed my tears, smiled and started dancing with confidence. I made the dance up as I went along. Nobody ever knew it wasn't the dance I'd learned in my ballet class, apart from my mum. I guess that was the night I learned that no matter how you feel inside, as long as you can put a "mask" on, smile and act with confidence, nobody will know any better. That worked for me until I was 39 years old.

I am the 2nd of 4 children, and 3 of us have been diagnosed with Bipolar disorder at various stages of our lives. My brother, a year older than me, and my sister, 8 years younger than me have been diagnosed with Bipolar. My youngest brother is 12 years younger than me, and even though he gets depressed he prefers to deal with it in his own way. My father suffered from extremely resistant major depression for many years, but was never diagnosed with Bipolar. Both my mother and father's ancestors suffered from depressive mental problems and my granddad's brother committed suicide. Could you say that there is some genetic predisposition? Maybe, I'm not sure. Now that I recognise the symptoms, though, I realise that I had lived with the symptoms of Bipolar as long as I can remember, however it wasn't diagnosed as such until I was 23 years old.

During my 6 years of university I was under great pressure, struggling through what I realise now as "highs", but more so, crippling "lows". I was taking light anti-depressants prescribed by my GP and self-medicating with alcohol. It made the "highs" higher, but the "lows" afterwards even lower. I didn't know what was wrong with me. I just felt so self-destructive. The only way I could motivate myself when I felt sluggish and low, was by negative "self-talk" and however destructive it was it managed to get me through the long nights of studying.

When I was 18 years old and in my first year at university, I made my first suicide attempt. I took an overdose of painkillers, but became scared and called for help when I started experiencing blurred vision and feeling sick. I ended up in hospital. I had my stomach pumped and afterwards my worried parents made me see a psychiatrist. A diagnosis of "stress-due-to-worrying-about-studies" was made. I started cutting myself to get release from the horrible pent-up destructive feelings and it made me feel better, but my mum was so upset by this when she found out that I felt too guilty to carry on. I had to find some other way toward release, so that the people close to me couldn't see and be affected. I started internalising my destructive feelings. I saw a psychologist as well, but it didn't help me. I didn't trust him, because he knew my parents and I wasn't really ready to talk. Anyway, I do not believe he took me seriously. He asked me to write down what was going on in my head. I did and I thought it was pretty messed up. He didn't say anything more about it and I took a couple of weeks off to study, went back to sit my exams and passed them.

From then on sometimes I was better and sometimes I was worse. I started smoking heavily, sometimes between 20 and 30 cigarettes per day. I only noticed the crippling "lows" because the "highs" were mostly too good to mention and I must have had periods of normality in between. I just can't remember them now. Every 2-3 years I would hit a depression "low" and become withdrawn and quiet, usually after the stress of exams. It was almost like a delayed reaction. By the time I was 22 years old, on my "highs" I had a heightened libido and became quite promiscuous, jumping from one relationship to the next, and getting myself into some tricky situations that could have been detrimental if I wasn't looked after from above as much as I was.

When I couldn't sleep at night, I got into my car and drove until dawn; anywhere and nowhere in particular. I hit a real "low" in my 6th year at University while preparing for my final exams. My dad had sunk into a really deep depression over the previous 3 years. He was resistant to every medication, even ECT, Electroconvulsive therapy, which only erased some of his memory. He eventually attempted suicide and it really shook our family. My mum struggled to cope and my younger siblings were only 12 and 8 years old. Having been responsible for them from a really young age I tried to help them through that time, while trying to get my dad to his psychiatrist appointments and supporting him and helping my mum. Initially I coped well and did well, but by the time my final exams were near I couldn't sleep, or eat or concentrate at all. One day I just collapsed in a sobbing heap on the floor in the Dean's office. I couldn't carry on. I was 23 years old.

I managed to sit my exams, but failed my Oral Pathology. Luckily, the Dental Board was lenient due to my circumstances and I was allowed to take some time out to prepare and re-sit my exam. I eventually passed, and eventually received my Dentistry degree in June 1998.

I left my home country a couple of weeks later to go and live and work in the UK. It was meant to be a short-term thing. I wanted to work for a while, pay off my student loan and travel a bit, before going back to my home country after 2 years. Most people probably would have found such a dramatic move an exciting and adventurous challenge, but I hit rock-bottom again in the months after arriving in the UK. I wrote in my diary and counted the days before I could go home. It was so bad that eventually I had to make the decision whether to go back home or to uproot my roots and make the UK my home. I couldn't bear to be so homesick any longer, so I did the latter and stayed.



My Bipolar was diagnosed in 1998. My first mood stabilising medication was prescribed at that point. It was Lithium carbonate. This drug has been around, studied and tested the longest in regards to Bipolar disorder. The other most common mood stabilising medications are the anti-epileptic ones: Valproic acid, Lamotrigine and Carbamazepine. They are often prescribed in combination with other medications such as anti-depressants. As I was still struggling with low moods, I was given Paroxetine to take in combination with the Lithium. This triggered a dangerous "high". Luckily my best friend noticed that I was behaving oddly and contacted my GP, who stopped the anti-depressant immediately. I took Lithium for about a year only, until I became pregnant with my son and the medication had to be stopped. I was then referred to a specialist psychiatrist that worked specifically with pregnant women. During my pregnancy, and immediately afterwards, I was put on Carbamazepine, as this would not affect my unborn baby or breast milk and would prevent me from developing post-natal depression.

I felt really well during the whole of my pregnancy. Having grown up in a Christian home, with my father being a Vicar, my parents were very shocked and upset about my pregnancy occurring out of wedlock, and they insisted that I and the father of my baby married before our child's birth. We were madly in love, afraid, and both very young at 24 years of age. I wasn't allowed the big, white wedding I had always dreamed of, in my home country, because I was an embarrassment. So we had a small Registry Office Wedding in England, in the rain, when I was 6 months pregnant.

After my son was born, I took no medication for 8 years. I would like to think that I was reasonably well during that time. But during those years there were 4 events that were extremely traumatic and stressful: A miscarriage in 2002, a litigation case that dragged on from 2004-2009, a new business purchase in 2005, and an extensive oral surgery course from 2007-2008. By 2004 I was working 40 hours per week and crying every morning in the car on my way to work, before putting on a smiling, fake, brave face by the time I walked into my surgery. I started drinking more and more at night time to calm myself down. I struggled increasingly with handling pressure.

The stress of the new business and the litigation case began to take a toll on the relationship with my husband. We were constantly arguing. I'm not even sure which was first: the effect of my "highs" and "lows" on our relationship, or the constant pressure from our relationship and work, on my Bipolar. Either way, it was a hideous, vicious circle that slowly but surely broke our relationship and tore our hearts apart. I ended up spending my time torn between wanting to run away and wanting to come back to beg forgiveness in order to try again; but it was harder each time.

I hit my first "high" again in 2006. I had taken up Karate in the hope that it would distract me enough to calm me down. I didn't seek help. The cracks started to appear that year. My second "crash" came in 2008, by which time my moods were rapidly cycling from extremely "low" in the morning to really "high" at night. I started to feel suicidal. I saw the duty team for the first time at my home. The psychiatrist on call advised that I take some time out to recover. Instead I carried on. The business couldn't afford me taking a break. I hated myself and my husband for the pressure we were both putting me under, but I carried on. I started taking medication and was soon

discharged. The medication dose was reduced quite quickly and by 2011 the next "high" crash came. I finally saw a psychiatrist that researched my entire history and started me on a combination of Depakote (Sodium Valproate) and Serequel (Quetiapine). I responded well and was discharged after 1 year. I tried to do everything right; I avoided alcohol, drugs and caffeine, exercised, ate a balanced diet and tried to sleep enough, but I did not change my workload nor did I minimize my stress. My husband and I carried on with our progressively broken-and-patched-up relationship and worked together as before.

In the weeks before my 2nd suicide attempt in 2014, I found that my bipolar was running a cycle of 2 weeks feeling ok and 1 week of rapidly sinking into a deep depression and paranoia. I felt sure that my husband was having an affair with his best friend. I became so anxious that I would scratch the skin off my body. I could just about manage to ride it out to get to the 2 normal weeks again. Being aware that the purpose of the mood stabilising medication was partly to prevent a "high", I tried to reason with myself that this was as good as it was going to get. So I didn't tell anyone. The thought of suicide, if I couldn't manage anymore, started to feel reassuring, and this thought helped me get through, even as I became overtired due to a lack of sleep.

By the time that awful Saturday in June came, it took a silly argument about a teacup as I was on my way down into the "low" part of my 3 week cycle I carried on my quick descent into that dark place so that I lost track of anything that was reality around me. I didn't come out of that cycle on June the 23rd 2014. I was suddenly and completely detached from myself and reality that I had no thought and no feeling left. I didn't think, because I couldn't; I was just a passenger on a runaway train heading over a cliff.



People tend to think that attempting to, or managing to, commit suicide, is a selfish or cowardly act or an easy way out; as if one has actually thought about it and decided that they want to hurt someone or that their loved ones weren't important enough for them to consider, or that they were just weak and it seemed like an easy option. Well let me tell you: suicide can be a cry for help or an act of desperation, but when people with mental health problems, including bipolar or severe depression, attempt to or manage to kill themselves, I can assure you, they are way beyond the point of rationalization. When you look in their faces, they will look dead and grey. They will have a vacant look to their eyes, because they are empty. There is no rational mind inside them. How do I know? I've seen that vacant look in my father's eyes when he came to kiss me goodbye, telling me he was taking his car for a service, when his true intention was to kill himself and that was where he was heading. I've seen that same vacant look in my own eyes staring back at me from a hotel's bathroom mirror, before sticking a needle in my arm and downing a bottle of Vodka. At that point in time you don't consider the consequences of your actions or the effect on everyone left behind, because you simply can't. The only thing you know, is that it needs to stop and go quiet.

You know how looks can be deceiving? In the weeks after my serious suicide attempt, while I recovered in hospital, several friends told me how shocked they were and how much they used to envy me, that they thought I had the perfect life; a great husband and lovely son, a successful business woman, working part-time, owning two businesses, having plenty of money, always going on nice holidays. They didn't understand. Not many people do, apart from those who suffer themselves.

Many people think that the last place they would want to be is in a psychiatric hospital unit. But you know what, being admitted to Milbrook was, for me, like a Safe Haven. For 4 weeks, I felt protected from myself and the outside world that had become too harsh a place for me. I needed time out. I had lost myself and my dignity. Being locked away made me feel safe. It was a place where I could become human again. I was so broken and fragile. The people I shared space with in those four weeks made me realise again that mental illness is not selective in the choosing of its victims. Some were rich, some were poor, some were extremely intelligent and others were just old and alone. Some cried at night, some laughed and others were angry. Sometimes they made me laugh and sometimes I felt like crying with them. Sometimes everyone was just there, quiet, each with their own struggles.

It was strange to have the roles reversed, with me now being the patient. I recall an evening when one of the psychiatric nurses in the ward asked me whether I felt scared and uncomfortable being amongst the other psychiatric patients. I said to her then that I honestly didn't. I felt like one of them. I was suffering and struggling like them, and there was no pressure or expectation of me fixing them.

I certainly didn't judge any of them. A few of them I will never forget, just because they made me laugh when I was so deeply depressed that some days I could barely drag myself out of bed. Kim - who wanted to color her hair red in the television room sink and who nicked my special pink pyjamas from the laundry room, because she said they were nicer than hers. Charlotte - who liked to wear purple, did her dance routines and sang really off-key with her headphones on, outside my bedroom window early every morning and Old Evelyn, bless her soul, who wore her clothes back-to-front and inside-out, different colors of wigs, way too much make-up and talked randomly to people she could and couldn't see. She would burst into tears at any time and laugh just as quickly again. One of my favourite memories is the evening she came to sit next to me with a wig hanging in her eyes, giving me a toothless grin and asking for some milk and a cookie. Out of the blue she suddenly said: "I'll be Cinderella and you can be my little reindeer!!!" Just as quickly she got up and walked off to ask one of the nurses to escort her outside so she could have one fag to smoke. I just felt a deep empathy for them all. In there I didn't feel lonely.

It took time to get the right combination and concentrations of medication to even out my moods, to help me sleep, and lift my very dark morning-depression. For the first week at least I didn't even leave my room. I just slept and slept, partly because I was so exhausted and drained, and partly because my mind and body couldn't deal with the reality or enormity of what had happened.

Integrating back into society after hospitalisation is a long and difficult, but necessary, process. I wanted everything back to normal immediately. I wanted to take charge of my home again, get back to work and take on all of my previous responsibilities. This was partly because I felt so guilty that others had to stand in for me whilst I was away and partly because I felt so totally and utterly incompetent and worthless whilst doing nothing, apart from trying to recover. At the same time I couldn't immediately manage it all, and became so angry and frustrated when people told me I had to slow down. I do know that I have in the past created my own stress by putting pressure on myself.

There were so many people to help at home and at work. I struggled to handle the reality of the consequences of my suicide attempt; the effect it had on my relationship with my family members, my husband, my friends, work colleagues and businesses. I had no intention of being around to see this field of destruction that I had created once again, and yet here I was having to face it again anyway. I felt like a stranger in my own home and in my work place. That really strong sense of not belonging anywhere came back with a vengeance. I, who so hate change, had to watch how everything had changed again because of what I had done and I had to accept it. Nothing was getting any easier, in fact, it was just really hard, but just in a different way. I started to think that I had to stop expecting life to become easier, and then perhaps I wouldn't find it so hard; you know, no expectations, and no disappointments. For the rest I had to learn patience and accept that certain things only become better with time, that quiet miracle worker which heals, bestows

wisdom, and provides perspective. I also had to learn to accept that other things were just too broken to be fixed. I wanted to carry all the blame. I thought I deserved it; I didn't.

Dr John Demartini, the American researcher, public speaker, and international educator in human behaviour, wrote the following: "The fantasy of always being nice and never mean, of having the career we admire and never despise, of having relationships that are never-ending honeymoons, of having bodies that resemble the air-brushed models we see in magazines or of having support and comfort without challenge and discomfort. It's these lopsided fantasies that are the source of our mental suffering and which often result in our feelings of sadness or depression. We won't have fulfilment by running away from half of our existence. It's not about thinking positively, it's about recognising that the positive and the negative, the good and the bad and the happy and sad, complimentary opposites forever remain joined. True gratitude emerges the moment we embrace the whole of reality and find meaning in both sides."

I've been thinking about this a lot since starting to read Heather Matthews' book, "The Manifesting Miracle System". I believe that we are spiritual beings having a physical experience and it encouraged me to consider whether some of us are just sensitive to the ebbs and tides of life, that we experience these as "highs" and "lows". I have become mindful of living only in the moment, very aware that yesterday is history, tomorrow's a mystery, but today is a gift; that is indeed why it is called the present.

Brigitte Nicole writes - "Never apologise for being sensitive or emotional. Let this be a sign that you've got a big heart and aren't afraid to let others see it. Showing your emotions is a sign of strength."

I had to learn to overcome guilt, anxiety, worry and fear and to cope with and accept my own sensitivity and emotions; that was the hardest part. Once I did, I felt liberated and at peace. I was able to see and accept truth as it really was, instead of reality being clouded by my distorted perceptions. I realised that ongoing personal growth was a necessity for my continued sanity and that true greatness really lay in the wisdom to know to do the right thing; to look at the bigger picture, rising above the here and now and what lies ahead, to make decisions when no one else wants to, and to take everyone's generalised well-being into account and put it at the highest bar. For the first time in my life I could honestly say, "I deserve to be alive and be happy and loved!", "I deserve all good things that life has to offer", and genuinely believed it. It was only then that I managed to leave the very broken and dis-functional marriage that I had allowed myself to be trapped in for 16years.

I know Bipolar can be very extreme and overwhelming and cause us to behave completely out of character. At the time it is often impossible to see it ourselves and we can't just snap out of it. Please believe that the way we behave is not purposely spiteful with any intention toward hurting anyone, or due to a lack of gratefulness for what and who we have in our lives, or that we think we should and can have better, nor that our own misgivings make us jealous of others' happiness and therefore we create situations to destroy what is theirs. Our extreme mood swings and our behavior is as a result of it not being based on reality at all. It is completely irrational. This is why we can find things that most people that do not suffer with bipolar disorder would not find unsettling or extremely upsetting, and then we react accordingly. I'm not trying to say that people need to "walk on egg shells" around us all the time, even though they probably feel like they should. I'm trying to help you to understand that when we are feeling unwell, what goes irrationally through our minds is completely different from what goes rationally through yours and, therefore, trying to reason with us when like that, can be very difficult or impossible.

I acknowledge that these issues are ours and that we need the correct professional help to learn to deal with the extreme mood swings that send us from "pole" to "pole". Any sadness and frustration lies in the uncertainty that we can only try our best, live right and utilize all the support we can get, but that there is unfortunately no guarantee that we will always stay well. It is hard to accept for us and for our loved ones. It makes it hard to overcome guilt and you learn to live from day to day,

grateful for each day that went well and to deal with each bad one as it comes. This is in the hope, faith and trust that sooner or later it will pass and you will feel better again.

It's difficult to know what to do in order to achieve one's best potential. If you're on your own and you are the only one affected by it, you can lock yourself away when it comes and ride it out. If you have a partner or a family, they see, feel and experience it with you and that's the difficult part. You love them and you don't want them to suffer because of you. But how do you shelter them from it, especially when you've tried to cover it up for a long time and you just can't anymore? I've thought many times: if love wants the best possible for the people you care most for, even if it excludes yourself, do you leave them to spare them anymore of it? Or do you stay, attempt to get, and keep, well and then hope for the best? I was torn between these two choices for a very long time.

I am aware that, in trying to lift the "lows" and bring down the "highs", or to numb the emotional pain that accompanies the especially depressive pole of bipolar disorder, sooner or later many of us have at some stage turned to drugs or alcohol, or both, to self-medicate. This may make a lot of people wonder about the proverbial chicken/egg situation (which was first?). Whichever way you look at it, self-medicating doesn't help in the long run.

Ultimately, for us to be able to move forward and get well it is important that we are able to identify with all the versions of ourselves that present during our "highs" and "lows", so we can recognise them, deal with them, accept them all as parts of ourselves and finally put them to rest.



I wonder if, when the German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche said, "That which does not kill us makes us stronger", he really meant that situations which do not totally destroy us mentally, emotionally and/or physically, can create an opportunity to help us become more resilient and cope better in the future? I have sometimes watched people "survive" traumatic life events, but see they are left vulnerable, beaten and broken as a result. However, even if they appear to be weak to others, does their strength not lie in the fact that they try to carry on, even if they crawl instead of walk? Us, who suffer from Bipolar disorder, have to face a battle, sometimes on a daily basis, against the "peaks" and "troughs" of our emotions. We struggle not to let them get out of hand and at the same time try to function as normally as possible. It takes constant effort, concentration, courage and strength that nobody can see. Even when we are managing as well as we possibly can we fall many times, but that does not make us weak. I guess, for me, the difference between weakness and strength or success and failure is whether you keep TRYING to get up or not. And, I believe, like Winston Churchill said: "Never, never, never give up." Keep on trying...

There is an English proverb that says: "Necessity is the mother of invention". I found the Afrikaans equivalent, translated directly, to actually be more apt for myself: "NOOD LEER BID" - when in need you learn to pray; and believe me, Bipolar Disorder has taught me to pray constantly. I was brought up in a Christian home, but this thing really brought me to my knees. It brought me to a

place where I ended up begging and praying to the only God that I believe in, where I learned to have blind faith, hope and trust that He would help me so that I wouldn't go completely insane during those hours (sometimes days) that I could do nothing but ride it out and wait for it to pass. When it finally let me go it left me feeling physically exhausted, and emotionally and mentally drained. It felt like my mind and body went into shut-down and I could do nothing but go to sleep, because I couldn't think and I couldn't move. Once it was all gone, I always felt a grateful, quiet sense of peacefulness, a lightness, and relief that I would have a period of normality and rational thinking. It always felt like coming to rest in a sanctuary, as if I was savoring a little piece of heaven, until it all came back again, and it always comes back, because it runs its cycle, whether it is hours, days, weeks, months or years.



During those times it had a hold on me, the following true story, "The Refiner's Touch", picked me up off the ground, when nothing else could:

There was a group of women in a Bible study group, studying the book of Malachi. As they were studying chapter three they came across verse three which says: "He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver." This verse puzzled the women and they wondered what this statement meant about the character and nature of God.

One of the women offered to find out about the process of refining silver and get back to the group at their next Bible study. That week the woman called up a silversmith and made an appointment to watch him at work. She didn't mention anything about the reason for her interest in silver beyond her curiosity about the process of refining silver. As she watched the silversmith, he held a piece of silver over the fire and let it heat up. He explained that, in refining silver, one needed to hold the silver in the middle of the fire where the flames were hottest so as to burn away all the impurities.

The woman thought about God holding us in such a hot spot - then she thought again about the verse, that He sits as a refiner and purifier of silver. She asked the silversmith if it was true that he had to sit there in front of the fire the whole time the silver was being refined. The man answered that yes, he not only had to sit there holding the silver, but he had to keep his eyes on the silver the entire time it was in the fire. For if the silver was left even a moment too long in the flames, it would be destroyed.

The woman was silent for a moment. Then she asked the silversmith, "How do you know when the silver is fully refined?" He smiled at her and answered, "Oh, that's the easy part -- when I see my image reflected in it."

If today you are feeling the heat of the fire, remember that God has His eye on you and will keep His hand on you and watch over you until He sees His image in you.

AUTHOR UNKNOWN

NOTE: I verified that the information in this story is true. I contacted a silversmith at [www.silversmithing.com](http://www.silversmithing.com) and asked if there were any untruths in the parts related to the process of refining the silver.

I received the following response from Fred Zweig: "I am familiar with the verse from Malachi. The similarities of actual refining and the chapter and verse from the Bible are accurate. It is important not to overheat the silver when refined in this process and clean molten silver will shine with a mirror-like quality when it is ready to pour. The high temperatures do volatilize the impurities and form on the surface as dross. It is important to be attentive to the molten metal as it does it no good to overheat it. It may not destroy the silver, but silver has an affinity for absorbing oxygen and this can make it unworkable."

I think my euphoric experience of the "highs" of Bipolar, has been better than the elation you can experience from a few glasses of wine to any hardcore drugs. My most creative moments, paintings and composed pieces of piano music, came about while I was "high", had endless energy and no need for sleep. Colors seemed more vibrant, and sounds much clearer. Everything had special meaning and I saw "signs" everywhere. Looking at photographs, my eyes had a wild, but distant look in them. I used to go walking with several plastic bags in order to pick up rubbish, believing that flowers were being left for me as a reward. During these periods I also underwent my biggest personality changes, so much so that afterwards I would not recognise myself, my behaviour or even my appearance as it changed with my moods. I became overly confident, reckless, ruthless, promiscuous, irritable, aggressive and irrational, usually leaving some trail of destruction behind me. Coming back down to reality after hitting that "high" is an unbearable place of hell, when having to take responsibility for what I did and said when I became that other person; not to mention the crushing guilt that accompanies it, once I realised what I'd done. You can't go back and you don't know how to go forwards. You apologise till you're blue in the face, feeling ashamed and scared, but it makes no difference. You desperately want and need for things to go back to normal so that you can recover, but what you've done has consequences and it becomes a vicious circle of trying to get better, but having to cope with the chaos and stress resulting from your behaviour. It creates a cyclical pattern of vicious circling, like an Ouroboros; a snake swallowing its own tail.

An unfamiliar freedom and peace now fills me with a deep, bubbling fountain of joy, hope and gratitude to my Heavenly Father, who has walked beside me for the past 41 years. It is He who carried me when I was too weak to walk, and He who saved me from myself when I was on a path of self-destruction. On my never ending journey of self-discovery I have learnt to accept and love myself unconditionally and that also means I must accept the Bipolar part of myself. I have surrounded myself with people that love and accept me, and that make me laugh. It is liberating to realise that all the things I thought I couldn't do or be, I can, and I live my life to serve and help others, because it gives my life a purpose.



Don't get me wrong, it does not mean that I don't struggle anymore. Some days are easier and some days harder, but my perception of myself and my Bipolar has changed.

In the words of Leo Rosten: "In some way, however small and secret, each of us is a little mad. Everyone is lonely at bottom and cries to be understood; but we can never entirely understand someone else, and each of us remains part stranger even to those who love us. It is the weak who are cruel; gentleness is to be expected only from the strong. Those who do not know fear are not really brave, for courage is the capacity to confront what can be imagined. You can understand people better if you look at them - no matter how old or impressive they may be - as if they are children. For most of us never mature; we simply grow taller. Happiness comes only when we push our brains and hearts to the farthest reaches of which we are capable. The purpose of life is to matter - to count, to stand for something, to have it make some difference that we lived at all."

"The fear of suffering is worse than the suffering itself" - Paulo Coelho

Please, don't give up on me, or yourself, or anyone like us. I want to bring convey this message of hope, that even though Bipolar disorder is not curable, I have seen in others and experienced myself, how it is treatable with the correct medication, manageable with healthy lifestyle changes, supporting talk therapy, the support of professionals and the love of caring family and friends.

Tibetan proverb: "The secret to living well and longer is: eat half, walk double, laugh triple, and love without measure."