

Bipolar is a lifelong illness, it's a real medical illness and shouldn't be taken lightly

by Melanie in Virginia

I had always had problems with feeling down, melancholy even, but that first episode of major depression was different. Not only was it more intense, it was also preceded by six months of utter hyperactive activity and productivity. I would later learn that those six months were my first episode of hypomania.

Later, as my depression cleared, I was hit out of the blue with a severe episode of mixed mania. I was agitated, depressed, hyperactive and irritable beyond anything that I could have previously imagined. The most devastating fact of all of these episodes was that they disrupted my medical school career for several years. I basically swung from one extreme to another until someone mentioned the words bipolar disorder to me. It was at that point that I began to see my life in a completely different light....and finally knew truly what was wrong. Those first two years were marked with a loss of relationships and a loss of my career path. Stigma was felt early in the illness as friends pushed me away and my medical school made it almost impossible for me to regain admission until I had been cleared by several mental health professionals for reentrance. Even after the medical clearance from psychiatrists and psychologists, I found myself shunned by the medical community who had been so supportive to me in the past. Despite all the obstacles placed in front of me, I did finish medical school. I managed to find a very caring psychiatrist who guided me and educated me about my illness. I found out that it is a lifelong illness that requires constant medication management. It was difficult to accept this diagnosis in the beginning, but I managed to find my niche in medicine through my illness. I found that I wanted to help those with mental illness from experiencing the same stigma that I received from the medical community. I truly found my calling in the field of psychiatry. I was determined to make some sort of a difference in those with mental illness, so I packed my memories from those devastating years of medical school and began a residency program in psychiatry. My illness has not abated. I am in remission from depressive and manic symptoms now with the help of medications and therapy...but I do know that it's always lying under the surface. I have been hospitalized seven times since my first episode of debilitating depression at the age of 23. I am now 34 and practicing psychiatry.

I even manage to volunteer as the psychiatrist for the mental health association's free clinic and I find this to be the most rewarding part of my job. Despite having bipolar disorder...in fact, because of bipolar disorder I have become a more compassionate, concerned, and caring physician. I truly identify with my patients and care about their quality of life. I am very blessed in many aspects of my life and I would not go back and change a thing about my life thus far. My illness has not defined me. It has changed me but not broken me. I feel hopeful and grateful every day that I was able to find my purpose in life in the most unlikely of places; in an illness that devastated me.

If I could change anything in this world it would be how people treat those with mental illness. I truly think that it is one of the most widely accepted forms of prejudice in the world. Stigma is a terrible thing. It prevents people from getting care because they are afraid of being labeled. It prevents good care because many physicians do not take it seriously and often do not care to treat even the medical problems of those with mental illness. I found out the hard way that stigma is alive and permeates the

medical community. I guess if I had to give some words of advice to someone with a mental illness, especially bipolar illness, it would be to not forget that this is a lifelong illness that affects you and it's a real medical illness not to be taken lightly. Do not become part of the stigma problem; educate those around you through your actions and words. Hopefully, if enough people talk about their mental illness and demonstrate that we come from all walks of life and can be found everywhere, stigma will not grip us like it now does.

Lastly, find a provider who cares and takes time with you. It is possible to achieve a high quality of life. Love yourself and respect yourself and don't expect less from anyone else.