

## "I Wasn't Out to Beat This, I Just Wanted to Know How to Live With It."

by Ted in North Carolina

Having experienced depression and manic symptoms in my teens, I turned to drug and alcohol abuse to medicate and subdue my struggles. My parents were at a loss during this period--my truancy from school, my suicidal thoughts, and my continued defiance baffled them despite attempts for family counseling. Manic depressive disorder, or bipolar disorder, was never even considered or screened for. My symptoms continued into my 20s and 30s with bouts of depression and mania. I lost many jobs because I felt that I could conquer the greatest of tasks, but in reality, I failed at most. Depression would ensue without any treatment.

My symptoms during these times were not enough to cause great concern to my family and friends due to being short in duration and not seriously destructive. Although, subconsciously, I did everything I could to sabotage my jobs, friendships and create an isolated environment with which our family merely existed. I grew up as a failure who could not reach his true potential, according to my father. I was a definite disappointment. Physical and emotional abuse only antagonized my feelings of shame, low self-worth and self-image. This carried on into adulthood. As I experienced undiagnosed episodes of depression and mania, the shame and guilt of failures--past and present--surfaced with a vengeance. I obsessed about suicide for several years, planning details down to the most minute degree, seeking locations, and even taking special trips in my car locally to find the right circumstance in which to make it happen. During these hour or so drives, I smoked at least a full pack of cigarettes--serious chain smoking.

At 33-years-old I first went for help. Seeing an intern at a teaching clinic, I spoke to her about feeling sad, discouraged and unable to sleep well. Never would I divulge my unending obsessively dark secrets of suicidal thoughts. This would be taken care of by medication so I thought. This intern never even asked. She prescribed an older antidepressant. Taken at night, this medication made me pass out. I refused to take it. After a week, I went back to the same doctor demanding something better. She sent me home with a new medication that seemed to work in just two weeks. I had some mild side effects in the beginning, but after three or four weeks they subsided. I was, however, at this time feeling so much better. I was what my wife referred to as, "super joyful and energetic." I was on the top of the world--so much so that I rationalized my stopping the medication and figuring that the depression was an isolated event and would not bother me again. It didn't.

For at least the next five years, during which time I do not recall having any significant symptoms, my life consisted of repeated failures, job losses, and a distant relationship with my wife and son began to be the norm. I would start projects, let them fizzle out and ignore them as if they were never started. My obsession about suicide came back strong. Again, I planned for and was fixated on dying. This time the symptoms culminated in making a major trip. Living in North Carolina at the time, I set out for California, where I was born, to end my life. One Monday morning rather than going to work, I packed my car and drove. Driving straight for over 36 hours I was about to cross the Great Divide in Colorado. A year later I discovered that this was a mixed bipolar episode--both depression and mania. On the other side of Denver, I finally stopped for a rest. Exhausted, I checked into a hotel. I decided that I couldn't

continue on my trip to California, so suicide had to happen in the hotel room. I laid out the items needed on the bed for this to happen. I was stopped by some greater force. I made a phone call home to my wife. She and my son flew out to Denver to rescue me and drive me home. I didn't get diagnosed correctly at that time.

I spent the next year on a very high ride as my psychiatrist had me taking an antidepressant only. She would not listen to me telling her that no one should feel this good. She agreed upon my insistence to change medications. I came down off one too quickly and up on the other too slowly. The change sent me into another mixed bipolar episode. I ran off on another trip to end my life. Ending up in the hospital now for the third time in just over two weeks, I was seen by another doctor who dug deeper into my past and discovered a history of episodes in direct alignment with the symptoms of bipolar disorder. My medication was changed and there was improvement in a matter of weeks. At 41 years old, I finally had a diagnosis, and treatment for the disorder I had been suffering from since my teens.

Now at nearly 47, I have a very stable life, a solid medication regimen, and a strong support system. I now work in the mental health field as the director of a psychosocial rehabilitation program helping others do just what I did--take a journey of recovery. Self-advocacy, education and a supportive circle of caring people helped me in achieving the level of functioning and level of recovery I now enjoy. I wasn't out to beat this thing, I just wanted to know how to live with it.

In leaving a message for others, I'd like to say that you are not alone in this battle. Others have stepped where you are. Doctors can only do so much--doctors will only do so much--the rest is up to you. Take charge--it's your life.