

FINDING HOPE

My story outlines the progression of my illness from pre-diagnosis to today and what tools I used to improve my quality of life and get well. My emphasis is hope and the power of self responsibility.

It was almost a decade ago I was finally able to label the constant chaos that invaded my mind and stifled my spirit. For me a diagnosis meant an explanation and something tangible. This chaos took the form of an inner monologue (not voices, but my own constant narration) that directed my behaviors and polluted my thoughts. I spent the first 20 years of my life thinking I was just “different” or “overly emotional” – out of control sometimes and lacking any self worth and motivation for life. I felt the lows of bipolar, sorrow and hopelessness permeated every fiber of my being – there is no mistaking depression. At first I accepted it as a “normal” part of life – part of the teenage experience, growing pains, dwindling self-esteem and paranoia. But what does “normal” mean? If that was normal, I did not want to continue living my life. It was when I started college and began studying psychology that I put the pieces together and found hope. It took driving drunk one night completely out of control, with tears streaking down my face after storming out of my apartment having just screamed at all my roommates for no good reason, to realize something wasn't right. Why was I so sad and other times so angry? Why did I hate myself so much and feel so hopeless? I had all the reasons in the world to love my life. After seeking treatment, I was quickly diagnosed with depression and later bipolar disorder II. Experimenting with medications was frustrating; they made me feel better but not GREAT – I wasn't sure if that was good enough, should I settle for feeling just o.k.? At one point the combination of medications I was on kept me in a state of emotional numbness - I had no sensation, I was not happy and I was not sad. I felt like a zombie and it made it very hard for people to be around me. I wasn't myself. Within the first year of my diagnosis I finally found a combination of medications that worked. I remained hopeful that I would continue to recover and live life “normally” – whatever that means. I am mentally well now because I took personal responsibility for my health, seeking out every resource available to aid me in my recovery; medication, therapy, group counseling, books, research articles, nonprofit organizations (i.e. MHA, NAMI) and had a great support system. No matter how low I got, I stayed hopeful and looked toward the future for motivation. My family was and is my primary motivation; without the support and unconditional love of my parents, I would have given up. People told me I was “average” and shouldn't set my goals too high in college, so my motivation was achieving my Master's Degree, and I did with high honors. I was motivated by the thought that one day I would beat this thing and have a career helping others like me. Today I work for Mental Health America of Colorado and feel empowered everyday when I can lift someone else up and encourage them to embrace recovery. Today I am very disciplined in taking my medications appropriately, going to doctor/psychiatrist appointments regularly, being mindful of things that trigger me and taking care of myself (i.e. eating right, exercising, journaling). It has taken 10 years for me to discover that my ability to remain more powerful than my illness keeps me in control of my mind and my health. Having bipolar disorder may be part of me, but it doesn't define me. I believe without the medication I would be in a much different place mentally and would not have been able to achieve the goals that I set for myself. Medication is one tool used to recover from mental illness, for me it was the one that allowed me to regain a sense of self and take control. As a wise friend and colleague of mine once said, “Heal Yesterday, Live Today, Dream Tomorrow.”