

I'VE BEEN THERE: MY STORY

This story is a personal narrative of a 27-year-old man who was improperly diagnosed as having ADHD only at the age of five. At 15 he was diagnosed as having bipolar depression. This is his story of recovering from severe mania and depression, with advice on finding the right diagnosis and achieving goals. Since recovering, he graduated from a community college and went on to obtain a degree from a major university. He is currently employed as a paralegal in Columbus, Ohio.

The world stopped in 1997, the year I was diagnosed. That was 12 years ago. Since the age of five, I had been in treatment with my psychiatrist and pediatrician for ADHD. The hyperactivity I exhibited as a young child had become worse, and at age 15 I experienced my first manic episode. When I speak of it now, "manic episode" is just a way of compartmentalizing the feelings I had then and tucking them away in a drawer. It was more than that. It was dancing with danger, and flirting with destructive behavior for just the thrill of it. I vandalized someone's house. I experimented with alcohol and drugs. I hallucinated, hearing fast swing music everywhere. When the hallucinations became incessant, and my need for sleep dwindled to three or four hours a night, my mother took me to an emergency session with the psychiatrist. As it turns out, I had been misdiagnosed in part. It was only years later that my doctor and I found out I have both bipolar depression and ADD. For me, being diagnosed with bipolar depression was not so much a verdict as it was liberation. What young adult, in the peak of mania, knows what the words mean? I had no idea what bipolar depression was. I didn't have any preconceptions about it. I just knew that my treatment plan with my psychiatrist was changing and there was hope that I would only get better.

Several months later, I began a "black period" in my life that persisted for five years. Depression set in, and it progressively got deeper and darker, leading to two hospitalizations in 2000 and 2002. Nothing made me feel better. Nothing worked. My psychiatrist recommended that I begin work with a therapist. I had been to several, and initially was not convinced that therapy would help. But it was my desire to finally survive bipolar depression that made me stick to the treatment plan that we developed and I was able to find recovery. I felt that I recovered from my dark depression on October 23, 2002. On that day, everything I had been working on during treatment seemed to fit together. I noticed that on that day, the persistent weight that had been behind my eyes for five years was erased. I stepped outside and looked at the sky. Even though it was gray, it felt like I could now see in color. On that day, I created a plan. I wanted to go through school and graduate so I could obtain private health insurance and be self-supporting. Even though I was out of depression, I knew that if I didn't stick to my treatment plan, I wouldn't be able to achieve this goal. I stuck to the treatment plan and reaped the benefit of having done so. I obtained my Associate Degree, and went on to pursue a Bachelor's Degree in Political Science. Since graduation from university, I took my passion to serve and help others with bipolar depression to work. Currently, I'm spearheading an initiative with the Child Support Enforcement Agency I work for to help people with mental illness find gainful employment, so that they can get back on their feet, avoid jail or prison and feel the same joy in recovery that I have felt. It's important to work with your psychiatrist on finding the correct diagnosis. So be open with your psychiatrist. Tell him or her everything about what is going on with you right now, so that he or she can make an accurate assessment. Don't try to fish for a diagnosis on your own and present supporting evidence that helps the psychiatrist arrive at a conclusion. Be open. Be proactive. Be yourself. As long as you work together with your doctor and therapist, it's my belief that you can find recovery too and experience the joy

that comes with it. Always believe in yourself. Believe you can recover and that you will recover. If I had given up on life back in my early twenties, I would have never been able to achieve my goals and dreams. When I look at where I am today, I thank myself for having made the right choice. Don't give up on your dreams. Instead allow them to motivate you to get better. If you work with your doctor and take your medications, you can enjoy the life you've always wanted to live; keep your goals in the forefront.