

Finding Dry Land

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There was a moment in my life when I almost drowned.

Living in the largest dorm in the country with three best friends, experiencing my first serious college boyfriend, and living what I thought to be the perfect life of a college kid, I couldn't have dreamt of anything better. That is, until I turned my back to the ocean and was swiftly and dramatically pulled in by the undertow.

One moment I was there and one moment I wasn't. It was as if I had suddenly had my brain replaced by someone weaker, angrier, sadder. I didn't know where I was or what I had set out to do anymore. I couldn't understand what went wrong or why I was suddenly seeing violent images every time I closed my eyes. Though I didn't know it, this was a dangerous and intense case of depression. I stopped eating. I broke up with the man who was, at that time, the love of my life. I stopped leaving my room. I stopped all contact with the world, and whether I pretended I was there or not, my eyes were empty.

This went on for several weeks, floating around Chicago. To me this went on for a lifetime. I floated out to sea.

Then my ex-boyfriend called my parents. He called to let them know I wasn't safe, and just as swiftly as I was pulled under, I was pulled out.

Completely.

My dad arrived immediately. My life, my room, and my thoughts were packed up and shipped out. Flown back to Seattle and, in my mind, never to return. Nothing could have been more painful and dramatic to me at that point and place in my life. Nineteen years old and suddenly I was forced to leave my friends, my life, my freedom and everything that I had built within the last two years of hard-earned independence.

I arrived home tired, cold, and wet, water still in my lungs.

The next couple of years moved from an undertow to a tsunami. My mind moved quickly from a "simple" depression to a devastating suicidal obsession. Looking back I am amazed I am even here to tell my story.

In the next year and a half I spent time in hospitals for suicide prevention and for overdose recovery, and time in apartments drugged, depressed and dangerous. I spent so many hours feeling completely out of control of my mind and so many hours trying to fight against it with every form of self-medication and self-harm I could find that I am astounded that I have the ability to form thoughts or press my fingers to these keys.

It took me a long time to come to terms with what was happening. After having an initial diagnosis of bipolar disorder II, I spent many, many months fighting the label and implications before I received my final diagnosis of bipolar I. My months and years of fighting only made things worse and it took me a long time before I realized that if I was good to myself and my body, my bipolar would be good to me.

Once I finally gave in and decided to change my life things began to turn around again. Though it took lots of self-care: finding the right doctors, counselors, and meds, exercising, sleeping well and eating healthy, my stability allowed me to live the life I had always dreamed of living.

My stability and my luck at having such a great support network and medical care inspired me to make a difference in the mental health world. Having spent time in the worst psychiatric units with the saddest cases I realized that things must change. I realized that we need to share our stories for minds and beliefs to alter.

Today I am a new college graduate, I speak nationally at conferences, in classrooms and auditoriums. I write, collaborate and volunteer with major mental health organizations and education professionals and I have accepted an offer from a major publisher to publish my first book. Through my experiences I have realized that I needed to make a difference, and through my opportunities I have hopefully begun to do so. I have been changed by my experience with this illness, and work so that the change others feel may be positive.

Today I have found my way back to dry land where I can finally stand on firm ground. It is here that I will help others do the same.