

Teacher Talk

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My story begins with my fourteen-year career as an English teacher. I helped thousands of students write stories. But in 2002, bipolar disorder unexpectedly and dramatically altered my real-life story.

Back in 1988 I graduated from Muhlenberg College and began teaching middle school students. During this time I earned a Master's degree and continued on towards a Ph.D.

I met with a therapist in 1997 to address an inexplicable heavy sadness. A year or so later, a doctor started me on meds for major depression. But my constant motivation and fast-pace changed his mind to an ADHD diagnosis.

By 2000, I was involved with after-school activities, part-time jobs, graduate school, conferences, consulting. I gave more and more, hoping to "outrun" this oppressive melancholy. I moved into a new apartment, bought furniture, and with my new car, drove into NYC each weekend for Broadway shows, museums, and expensive dinners. I won Teacher of the Year. I was confused. Such success couldn't involve depression . . . right? I did everything but acknowledge my symptoms.

At first, family, friends and co-workers admired my ambition and enthusiasm. But when I began to lose patience and grow annoyed with those who couldn't "keep up," they questioned my racing and spending. "Slow down," they warned. "Be safe."

How off kilter had I become? Some mornings I could barely stop crying before students arrived, or I'd call in "sick" and numbly sleep all day. Just a few days later I'd arrive at work before dawn, and spin wildly from one activity to another -- doing, doing, doing. My intensity and intolerance for anything less than 150% kept others away. They found me too loud, too bossy, too irritable. Angrily, I argued with colleagues for not appreciating my efforts. I wondered why they couldn't recognize my amazing skills and creativity.

Until March of 2002. Crash! I suffered a nervous breakdown. One day I was teaching proper use of exclamation marks, and the next day I was a patient in a psychiatric hospital. Diagnosis: bipolar disorder. For weeks I wandered in limbo between the old me and somebody I didn't recognize. All my words disappeared.

Meanwhile, our school principal, unsure when or if I would return, hired a long-term substitute teacher. Months later, I lost my job because my new psychiatrist couldn't sign a letter declaring me fit to return. I moved out of my new apartment to live with my parents. My belongings went into storage, and because of med side effects such as dizziness, no one felt safe letting me drive. I gained weight and my fingers trembled when I tried to write.

Far from the future I imagined, I felt hopelessly disconnected and raw, struggling to balance my highs and lows. But my amazing parents would not let me give up. Their dedication to my well-being never faltered. First they outlined a daily routine: 8:30am wakeup, shower, dress, healthy breakfast, and so on. Refusing to accept "I-don't-feel-like-it," they nudged me towards health and healing, onto a path that ebbs and flows instead of zooming to an unsteady peak.

Next, a clear treatment plan to help me overcome symptoms. This included regular doctor visits, effective medications, and weekly psychotherapy to recognize personal triggers and coping strategies. DBSA (Depression/Bipolar Support Alliance) support groups and NAMI talks drew forth a fresh confidence and pro-active attitude. I explored internet sites, magazines, and books (Solomon's Noontday Demon, Kate Redfield's An Unquiet Mind) to understand the what, how, and why of bipolar disorder. For me, knowledge = acceptance.

For three years, I attended a weekly Day Care Program, where structured "classes" and time to share our difficult stories eased insecurity and isolation. Journaling Group, Art, even Horticultural Therapy fired motivation. Not only do I stop and smell the flowers now, but I know their names and how to care for them!

I use my "teacher voice" again. As a speaker for NJ's "In Our Own Voice" program, I educate families, psychology students, even politicians about bipolar disorder and assure them we can all make a difference. I helped refine NAMI's Hearts and Minds Program curriculum and sat on our County Mental Health Advisory Board. These gold-star experiences stimulated positive energy, urged me look beyond myself, and gave me new vocabulary (advocacy, stigma-buster!). My story is not complete, but I know I'm more than just better these days. I'm becoming a better person.