

NEVER ALONE: A YOUTH'S GUIDE TO BIPOLAR DISORDER

Written by Youth for Youth

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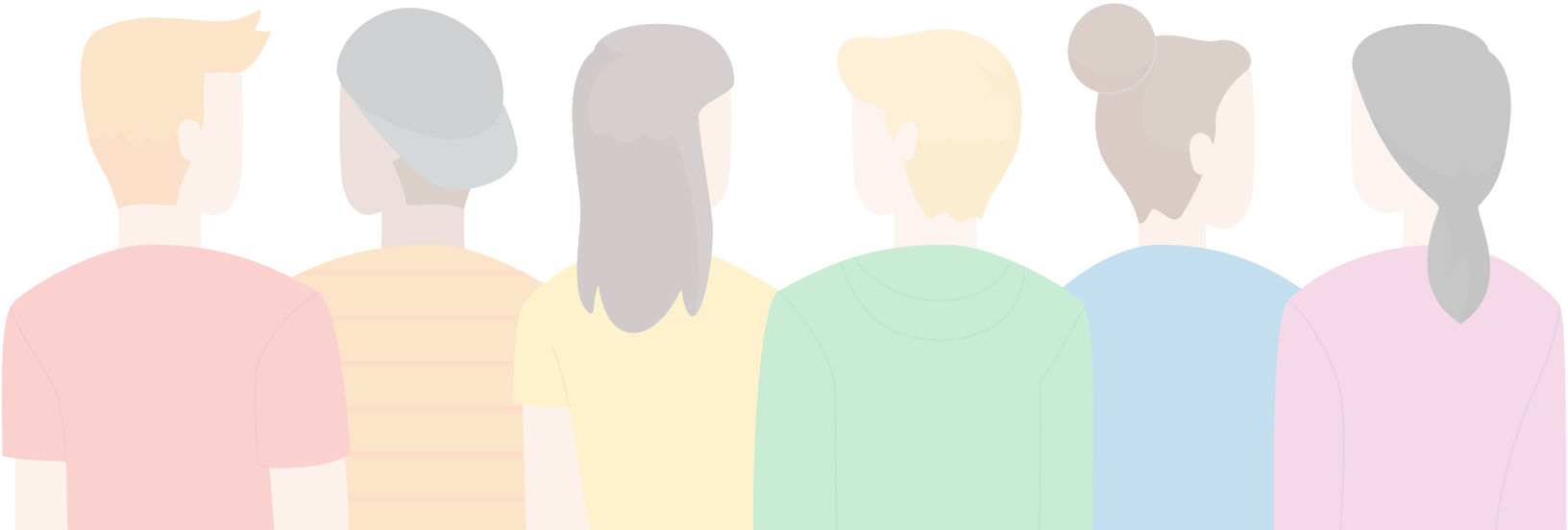
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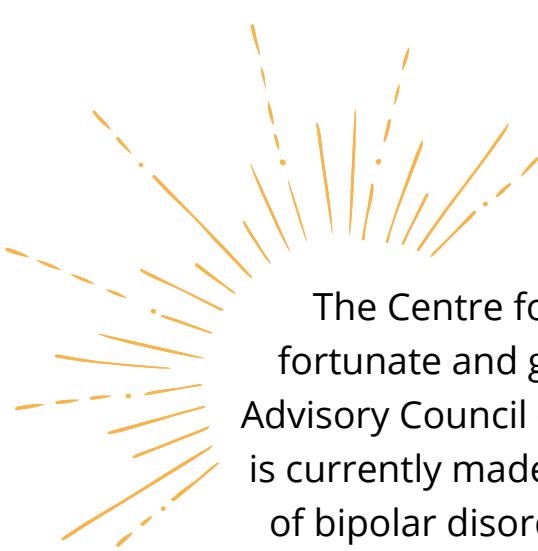
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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



The Centre for Youth Bipolar Disorder (CYBD) is extremely fortunate and grateful to introduce you to our first-ever Youth Advisory Council (YAC). The YAC was launched in January 2021 and is currently made up of a group of six youth with lived experience of bipolar disorder, each of whom has been actively involved in treatment and research at CYBD for five years or more.

The youth advisors bring their lived experience with bipolar disorder to collaborate with the CYBD team with the goal of continually improving the clinical experiences of patients and families at CYBD. Their unique voices help steer the CYBD team towards identifying unmet needs, creating new opportunities for growth, and making the greatest impact with education, anti-stigma, and advocacy for patients, families, and the community at large. This booklet is a key example of how our youth advisors have used their voices to address an unmet need and to positively impact, honour, and support others who are also affected by bipolar disorder.

The CYBD team thanks the members of our Youth Advisory Council for all their hard work and dedication in envisioning and creating this booklet, and for being so brave in sharing their personal experiences.



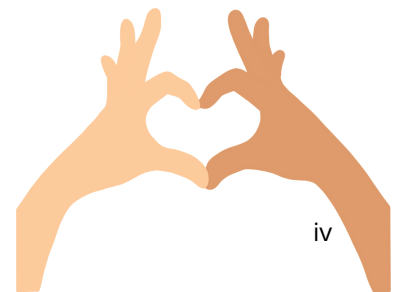
ABOUT THIS BOOKLET

So... you or a loved one have been diagnosed with bipolar disorder. There's a good chance you feel alone. Although you and your experiences are unique, you are far from alone in this world. You share this condition with approximately 46 million people across the world- some of them are household names with world class fame, but most have names you will never hear. The good news is this: we have been there too, and we have learned inside information along the way that we would love to share with you! But... who is this "we"? And why did we write this booklet?

We are a group of youth who have been lucky enough to receive exceptional psychiatric care from the Centre for Youth Bipolar Disorder (CYBD) at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH). We have been meeting for over one year as a group to harness the expertise from our lived experiences to improve youth bipolar disorder outcomes. Through the highs, lows and everything in between, we have each emerged with knowledge that cannot be found in a medical textbook. The purpose of this book is to share our lived experiences of bipolar disorder with other individuals who also have bipolar disorder, along with anyone else who wants to learn more. No matter where you are in your journey, we hope our work helps you understand that a fulfilling life is well within your reach.

We understand that the narratives shared in this book are far from representative of everyone's experiences. Further, no one's lived experience is more valid or more valuable than another. We are all different, and our hope is that these words make you smile and realize how special and unique your brain is, no matter where you or a loved one might be in your journey. If you feel that your voice is not represented by any of the personal stories, not to worry! We encourage you to write your own narratives in the blank "What's on Your Mind?" pages incorporated throughout the booklet, to add your unique voice.

Thank you!



ABOUT THIS BOOKLET

Before getting into our intentions of writing this booklet and how you may read it, we wanted to thank all of the staff at the Centre for Youth Bipolar Disorder at CAMH. Thank you for your time and allowing us to amplify our voices, thoughts, and experiences through this body of work. Many of us have known Dr. Goldstein for years and have also spent countless hours working with the CYBD's therapists, clinical researchers, and other support staff. We cannot thank you enough for providing us with access to specialized care that has given us the tools, hope, and confidence to write this piece of work.

To our knowledge, no other group of young individuals has ever written something like this. We are grateful to have had the resources to put our heads, voices, and thoughts together to create this booklet. We hope our work gets you thinking more about your own experiences living with, or living alongside a loved one with bipolar disorder. We have lived through the ups and downs, and this work is meant to candidly share some of our formative experiences that have shaped us into the people we are today.

How to use this book?

A large part of living with bipolar disorder is accepting the unknown. Most people do not know where life will take them 10 or 20 years down the road, regardless of whether or not they have bipolar disorder. However, the additional burden facing youth with bipolar disorder is that the diagnosis can feel like it comes with a lot of uncertainty.

One thing that's for certain is that there will be bumps in the road along the way.

Our hope is that you use this book to see the variety of perspectives on how we have coped with our diagnoses and navigated our journeys of living with bipolar disorder. We also leave room for you to consider how each narrative may or may not be relatable to you.

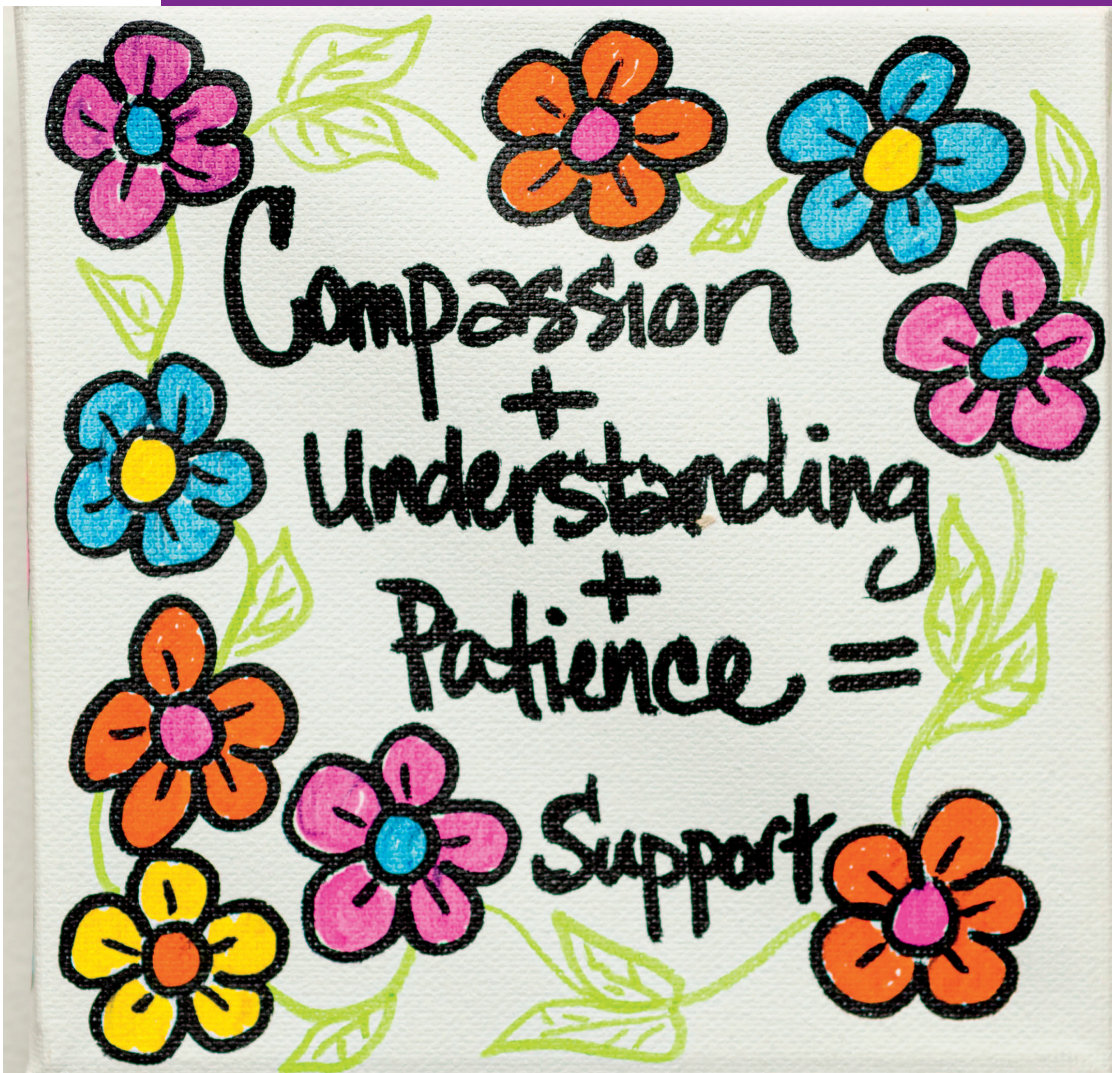
Why are we writing this book?

This book was created with the intention of reducing that feeling of loneliness you may have experienced or are currently experiencing. No matter where you are in your journey, we hope our work helps show you that living with bipolar disorder can be managed in a way that allows you to lead a remarkable and fulfilling life!

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STIGMA



QUESTION 1

Do you experience any self-stigma related to having bipolar disorder?
What strategies have you used to work through self-stigma?
How has your experience with self-stigma changed since first receiving your diagnosis?

Narrative 1

Immediately following my diagnosis, I struggled with severe self-stigma. I had lived with other mental illnesses for years, and I understood how they fit into my daily life. However, I felt like this new diagnosis placed me in a box; I was terrified of stereotypes and how I would be perceived by others. This shame and fear impacted my life for a long time, as I didn't know what to tell the many people who knew I had been hospitalized.

My recovery from self-stigma began when I got involved with mental health organizations in university. Fighting the stigma through advocacy initiatives and having open conversations about my experiences truly changed everything for me. Despite my progress, I still struggled to open up to my extended family about my hospitalization and diagnosis. Looking back, I've realized that this secrecy led to more feelings of shame around people that would have supported me if I had given them the opportunity to do so. I still sometimes worry that I can't openly be moody or irritable for fear that others will use these instances to judge my mental stability. However, I've realized that many typical ups and downs in life are a result of being human, and not necessarily symptoms of bipolar disorder.

QUESTION 1

Do you experience any self-stigma related to having bipolar disorder?
What strategies have you used to work through self-stigma?
How has your experience with self-stigma changed since first receiving your diagnosis?

Narrative 2

The short answer to this question is yes. For a long time, I felt that not disclosing my diagnosis to certain friends meant I was shamefully hiding a huge secret. As a result, I felt and still feel some self-stigma. Particularly when I hear friends throw around terms like “oh that was so manic of me”, or “stop being so bipolar”. Those are the phrases that make me internalize my diagnosis more than anything. Yet, with time, I have learnt that having bipolar disorder does not have to be a secret. In fact, disclosing my diagnosis has allowed me to build stronger relationships with friends I know care about me. Now I know that they will be there for me whenever life gets tough.

I was diagnosed a little over 4 years ago now, and there are still days where I feel shame for having certain symptoms (suicidal thoughts, racing thoughts, not being able to slow my brain down, not feeling like getting out of bed some days). But with time, and support from my inner circle including my psychiatrist, therapist, incredibly supportive boyfriend, family, and friends, I am more comfortable with my diagnosis than I ever have been. By and large, I think time heals everything -- particularly when it comes to the pain I felt when I was first diagnosed. I have realized that while bipolar disorder can be my biggest and scariest weakness at times, it is also what makes me uniquely me. It is my superpower some days, and my worst enemy on others. Now, when I am feeling some self-stigma, I reflect on how having a diagnosis is such a small contributing factor to my overall personhood. You are not your diagnosis, and that took me a long time to realize. Self-stigma is tricky, but it does not have to define you, and you shouldn't feel like it defines you -- yes, easier said than done. At the end of the day, I know that talking about how I am feeling and the stigma I feel allows me to be more self-aware. In turn, I have found that having a smaller inner circle of close friends and family members that I can talk openly about my diagnosis with, has reshaped my relationship with the stigma that once ruled my life. Life post-diagnosis has forced me to learn how to better communicate what I am feeling, what I need from myself, and what I need from others. Being able to speak openly, and not worrying about people's reactions has made my life easier and has also allowed me to address the sometimes unhelpful internal dialogue I engage in about the meaning behind my diagnosis.

QUESTION 1

Do you experience any self-stigma related to having bipolar disorder?
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Narrative 3

I do experience stigma towards myself, but I'm glad to say it has improved as I've learned more about myself and my disorder. Stigma towards the self is so difficult because it's also connected to stigma from others. It feels like all those intrusive negative thoughts I have about myself are confirmed simply because some other people believe it or because it's so ingrained in the media I consumed growing up. However, I realized that believing stereotypes or myths about my disorder is such an unnecessary disservice to myself, because it's attributing "truth" to other people's words simply because they aren't like me and don't have bipolar disorder – as if not having bipolar disorder would legitimize their opinion. In reality, not having bipolar disorder would likely make these individuals much less educated on the subject than me. It is also presuming that everyone else believes these things or has malicious intent towards you, which is black-and-white thinking and not true. There are people who will understand and accept you as you are.

The most important lesson I learned related to stigma is that you are in charge of your own narrative and whose opinion you give weight to. That isn't to say it isn't painful or that you are weak for being hurt or angry that others could misunderstand and mistreat you, but that your anger and hurt is for you. It is natural for you to be hurt and angry. Who wouldn't be? But I've learned that my anger is my brain trying to protect me and telling me that something is wrong. It is the part of you that knows something is wrong and needs to change.

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Narrative 3 cont'd

Of course, it's especially hard to work through self-stigma because stigma can be prevalent in work, school, my family and loved ones, so separating isn't as easy as simply avoiding it. With that in mind, another aspect that helped me understand stigma is empathy. In this sense, empathizing is not to put your own narrative on the backburner in favor of legitimizing someone else's, especially one who invalidates your own. And of course, there are always some people who I find even the act of empathizing with would be a disservice to myself. However, for me it is helpful to take a step back and try to take the world as it is and people as they are – complex individuals with their own narrow viewpoints cultivated from their own upbringing and biases. It is a source of power. This is not to agree with or even try to understand the stigma, but to perceive it as something inconsequential to your own identity and sense of self.

Feeling the weight of stigma is like looking in a corner where everything is very small and dark. But when you step back, and realize that these beliefs are just that – beliefs of people who do not understand you and whose biases are built up from their own experiences, ignorance, tradition, place, time, and culture, it becomes easier to separate it from your reality.



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QUESTION 2

When you tell people that you have bipolar disorder, do you worry about their reaction? What do you hope their reaction will be?

When did you share your diagnosis with people in your life and what was that process like for you? What helps you talk more openly about it? Has the way you communicate with others now changed from before?

Narrative 1

I do worry about their reaction, because most people don't know anything about bipolar disorder beyond what they hear in popular culture. People often associate it with dramatic and quick flips in mood, like if you were happy one minute then sad the next. There are phrases like "You're so moody today, are you bipolar?" or even "You're up then you're down...got a case of love bipolar", a lyric from the popular song "Hot N Cold" by Katy Perry. I always hope that people will be open to me educating them on both the diversity of bipolar disorder profiles as well as the varying levels of needs of patients with bipolar disorder. When I'm confident that someone in my life will be willing to stay open-minded, that's when I tell them about my diagnosis. I am also more careful myself now, making sure I don't use language that might inaccurately portray a mental disorder.

Narrative 2

Since my diagnosis, I haven't told many people that I have bipolar disorder, but not because I was ever worried about their reaction. I didn't really know about the stigma towards people with bipolar disorder when I was originally diagnosed, and I wanted to tell people about my condition so that they would understand the cause of my initial odd behaviour instead of believing in whichever assumptions they created. However, after discussing with a few people who did know about my diagnosis, I ultimately decided not to share my diagnosis with my friends. Looking back, I'm happy that I kept my diagnosis to myself (for the most part) during my teenage years.

I am now very aware of the stigma towards people with bipolar disorder, but this is still not why I avoid telling people about my diagnosis. I only avoid telling people about my condition because I personally don't think it's something that needs to be common knowledge for people that know me. As of right now, I think that the only person that I will ever worry about reacting to my bipolar diagnosis will be the person who I will end up planning to propose to. I'm not sure if that's something to worry about either because I don't think I'll ever want to be married to someone who is swayed by stereotypes.

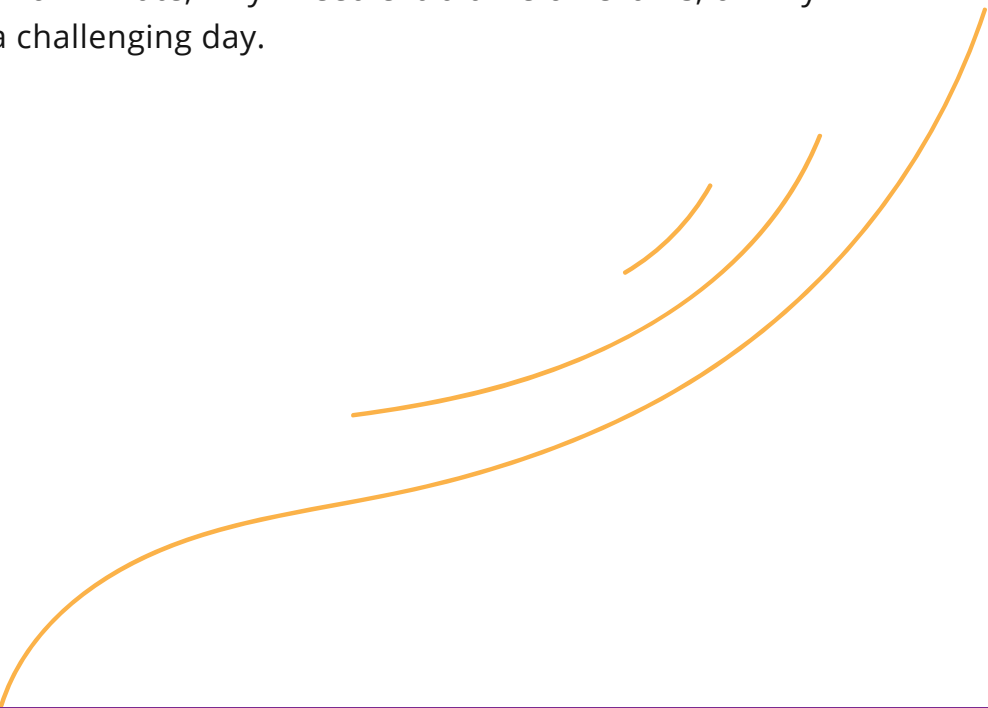
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When did you share your diagnosis with people in your life and what was that process like for you? What helps you talk more openly about it? Has the way you communicate with others now changed from before?

Narrative 3

I have struggled to tell people about my diagnosis. However, my experience with disclosing my diagnosis has been overwhelmingly positive. There have been cases where I did not get the response I anticipated or I didn't receive the supportive words I had hoped to hear, but I think that says more about those individuals and the lack of societal awareness and knowledge about what bipolar disorder really is. It is exhausting to feel like you must explain yourself, along with what bipolar disorder is, to others. Part of me just wishes that society as a whole would engage in more discussion about mental health, mental illness, and what bipolar disorder is. I think increased societal awareness about bipolar disorder would make it easier for me to talk about my diagnosis. It most certainly has taken me quite some time to learn how to talk about my diagnosis, but I have practiced and mastered what I want to say (through conversations with my doctors, social workers, and support system). I now feel able to tell people who I am not necessarily close with that I have bipolar disorder. Examples of this include telling a professor why I handed my homework in late, why I need extra time on exams, or why I might not be in class because of a challenging day.



QUESTION 2

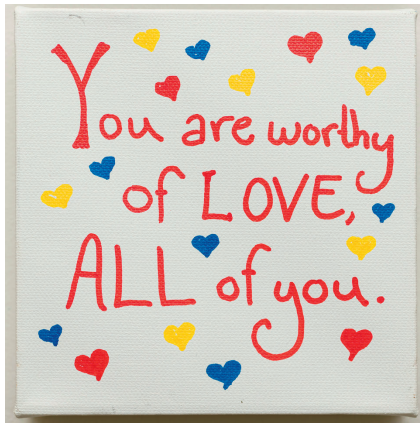
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Narrative 4

I did worry about people's reactions for the first five years after my diagnosis, and therefore, rarely disclosed. However, as of right now, I do not worry as much about their reactions. I try to openly disclose my experiences having bipolar disorder with the new people I meet, whenever it feels safe to do so. What if they have a negative reaction or reject me? Their loss! I'm a cool person. This is a part of who I am. I have since learned that if I had disclosed everything earlier, my life would have been significantly better. Hiding myself ate me alive from the inside out. I hope that someone's reaction would be this: "Oh, that's interesting. I haven't/I have met people with bipolar disorder before. What is that like? How does it affect your life? Do you see the world any differently than the next person?" My close friends knew right away, but I still didn't really discuss these matters with them or my family until recently. Honestly, I didn't really start sharing information about bipolar disorder until this year. However, I'm glad I did!

Seeing other mental health advocates share their experiences was certainly a motivator towards me opening up. Right now in my life, I try to say what is on my mind and censor myself as little as possible when it relates to talking about mental health. I believe that it is much more harmful censoring and committing energy to hide myself, as compared to the possible downsides of being open about my experiences. There still remains a worry that I may be discriminated against from an employment perspective. Here's a thought experiment I often do to work through anxieties: would I rather make X amount of dollars and live my life hiding who I am? Or take a 20% pay cut to be in an environment where I can fully be myself and inspire others? The answer, to me, is the second scenario. Yet, I don't think this discrimination will truly occur, with Human Rights Laws and the (hopefully) progressive de-stigmatization of society.



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DIAGNOSIS AND TREATMENT



QUESTION 3

When you were first diagnosed with bipolar disorder, what were some of your thoughts/attitudes? What are your thoughts now? What is one thing you wish someone told you when you were first diagnosed?

Narrative 1

When I was first diagnosed, I thought everyone was wrong. Part of me was in denial that I had bipolar disorder, not just a high functioning individual that sometimes struggled to sleep or slow down. Other times, my symptoms of depression made me think that I was struggling through high school just like other teenagers. Surely, other people I was close to also had mental health struggles. But after receiving a medical diagnosis, following hours of one-on-one and family interviews with team members that worked at the CYBD, I was still in denial. Frankly, I was pissed off. It seemed like everyone around me was turning against me in a way, and I struggled to realize that being diagnosed could actually help my physical and mental health in the long run. Being incredibly manic when I was first diagnosed did not help either. I look back on my diagnosis with a bit of chuckle now: I was highly dramatic, volatile, and angry at hearing the words “You have bipolar disorder”. Grandiose ideas rocked my thinking when I was first diagnosed. My brain (in complete denial) kept telling me that I was not sick, and that I did not have a chronic illness. Now, I have come to terms with the fact that you can have a bipolar disorder diagnosis and still live an incredibly fulfilling life. This realization has really changed my perspective from when I was first diagnosed. I am so grateful to know more about this deeply personal diagnosis, which is just one small part of my life. Looking back, I wish someone had told me, you have bipolar disorder, but you can still be a rock star. Yes, bipolar disorder is difficult, but it does not have to dictate how you live your life or who you are as a person.



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QUESTION 4

The path to recovery can often be non-linear. What has your experience been like with recovery? What has been helpful to your progress and what challenges do you continue to work on?

Narrative 1

Before being diagnosed, I had two pretty severe episodes of mania and several spells of somewhat debilitating depression. After sticking to treatment and medication, I can proudly say that I have not had a severe manic episode since the summer of 2017. However, I continue to struggle with depression. After graduating high school, I decided to pursue my undergraduate degree in a different country. I found reflecting on high school difficult; from the partying I used to engage in just to feel normal, to my lack of openness expressing to others the reality of my significant struggles with depression. I spent a fair amount of this past summer depressed, and I definitely still struggle quite a bit with negative self-talk and self-stigma when I am feeling down. But, with exercise, sleep, meds, and therapy, I now know what triggers my depressive and manic episodes. In return, although I still struggle with episodes, they are shorter, less severe, and much easier to get through than before I was diagnosed.

Narrative 2

Non-linear is the name of the game. I view recovery through the visualization of me playing with a yoyo while walking up 6 flights of stairs. The altitude of the yoyo represents my health, while the steps represent the passing years. Even if I've taken 3 steps up, I could still encounter times when my health, as demonstrated by the height of the yoyo, reverted to where it was several years past. This is how I felt for a long time, however, I do now feel that I have achieved stability, primarily through finding the ideal medication. Medication has been the primary step towards my recovery, and I do regret being hesitant to attempt certain medications.

As a health nut, I do almost everything within my grasp to achieve optimal health. This includes consistent exercise throughout the day, healthy eating, select supplements (ask your doctor), optimizing sleep, meditation, gratitude and much more. I also find that being open about my experiences and doing work within the mental health field has been similarly therapeutic to the pharmacological interventions and daily habits.

QUESTION 4

The path to recovery can often be non-linear. What has your experience been like with recovery? What has been helpful to your progress and what challenges do you continue to work on?

Narrative 3

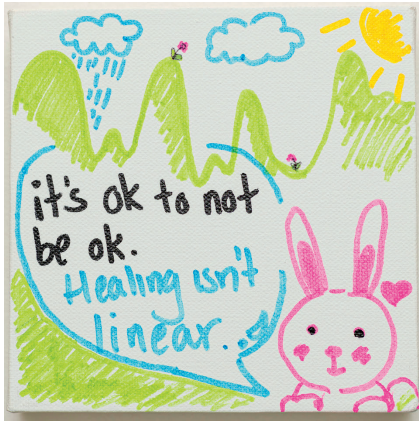
It's difficult, and I still struggle with it. In school, we learn that there are certain structures to stories. There's a beginning, middle, and end – precise points along a story arc with a resolution. So, if you're the protagonist, it means all your actions and reactions need to make sense in this "plot" of your life. But with bipolar disorder, unfortunately this isn't always the case.

I can't pinpoint a beginning to my recovery, because all the anxieties and impulses that come out in my illness existed in little pieces before now. So when did it start? It's impossible to find any one cause. And more than that, there's no guarantee that symptoms won't come back and for some it can be a lifelong disorder. So I feel like I'm in a constant middle, and that kind of ambiguity can feel terrifying.

When I was first diagnosed, I tried so hard to make sense of it. I kept thinking "Am I going to be manic or depressed now?" as if it was some perfect cycle that I could map out and predict. That's the thing, though: it can be unpredictable. Reflecting upon my symptoms, I wouldn't realize I was having an episode until much later. Sometimes I'd be manic and depressed at the same time, or I'd have a hypomanic episode but then not be depressed after.

I guess I learned that it's not that my illness can't be a story – it just doesn't have the rules I expect it to have. Putting it down into these rigid arcs doesn't do your experience justice. The reality is, it's a lot more complicated than that, and that's okay.

So now I try to focus on something specific – a moment, a feeling, a relationship, rather than "Bipolar Disorder" – because there's no way for me to explain it all. Think small, you know. I still have trouble, because it feels like I can write it down in a thousand different ways, and I can't tell what's real. But I can't look for a perfect truth, or version of reality that'll ever sum it up. Things that seem like they're opposites can exist together; it's okay for your brain to hold paradoxes.



Question: The path to recovery can often be non-linear. What has your experience been like with recovery? What has been helpful to your progress and what challenges do you continue to work on?

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QUESTION 5

What was the process like of finding the right medication for you? How long did it take you to figure out the right medications and dosing?

Narrative 1

Finding the right meds took some time. I was very hesitant to start medication at first because I had never been prescribed medication before. I also (which I do not recommend doing!) read a lot of negative things about other individuals' journeys with mental illness online, including some negative comments about bipolar disorder being debilitating and I also read about individuals with bipolar disorder who preferred to solely smoke weed, drink, or meditate to mitigate their symptoms. During high school, partying and weed were my two main medications before I was diagnosed. Now, I am a little afraid of all drugs knowing they can trigger some psychosis symptoms and mood episodes (both depressive and manic). I am currently on a mood stabilizer/antipsychotic, and lamotrigine. I also recently added another antidepressant that (fingers crossed) seems to have helped my depression and anxiety.

But I definitely work with my doctor to adjust my meds a little depending on what I am going through in life -- be it stressful job interviews, returning/leaving school, or going on vacation. I am realistic in recognizing what life events cause me more stress, and when it makes sense to up my meds to manage symptoms and increased levels of anxiety. So, I guess the answer to this is that my relationship with my meds continues to evolve. I think I have a pretty good handle on my dosage now, but I know that CYBD is only a phone call away if I feel like something is up and I might need to tweak my meds.



**Question: What was the process like of finding the right medication for you?
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QUESTION 6

Do you perceive there to be any benefits to having bipolar disorder? Is there something positive that came out of receiving your diagnosis?

Narrative 1

I strongly believe that I am a better version of myself than I was before I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder. After my hospitalization, it felt as though my world was flipped upside down. But this wasn't necessarily a bad thing as it forced me to reevaluate the way that I had been living. I had been advised for years to reduce stress and achieve a better balance in life. Yet it took my manic episode for me to truly learn how to take care of myself. Now I am more aware of the basic factors that are necessary to keep myself healthy, including monitoring my sleep, exercise, social supports, and stress levels.

Overall, I am a better version of myself and have developed more confidence and coping strategies than I had before my diagnosis. This allowed me to approach stressful situations with poise and achieve things that I wouldn't have previously believed possible, including starting medical school. My diagnosis of bipolar disorder also sparked my involvement with mental health advocacy, which is one of the most meaningful aspects of my life. My first-hand experience with mental illness also motivated me to undergo training to connect others who are struggling to their own supports.

QUESTION 6

Do you perceive there to be any benefits to having bipolar disorder? Is there something positive that came out of receiving your diagnosis?

Narrative 2

I am an incredibly empathetic person now. I am someone my friends can depend on to understand and validate their mental health struggles, and hardships in life in general. Everyone has their problems. Prior to my diagnosis, I think I was a worse listener and encouraged people to “suck it up” and just get on with life. Rather than validating my friends' or siblings' experiences and how they were feeling emotionally, I would encourage them to push past how they were feeling. I now know we have to accept feeling sad, and give our difficult emotions space, before we can get back to feeling healthy and like ourselves. I think having stronger empathy towards others, after having accepted my own hardships, is a major positive to come out of my diagnosis. I now know how to better deal with difficult feelings/emotions/thoughts, and how to support others that are also struggling.

Narrative 3

I actually think I'm a better person now than I'd be if I didn't have bipolar disorder. I'm fortunate to have increased my awareness about mental health diversity in general. I used to think that mental health issues were like a plague, one that you'd catch if you made unhealthy choices. Now, I see it as diversity, more like having a rare hair colour. It doesn't mean one of us is more sick than the other, we're just different. With my diagnosis, it also feels like I've matured more quickly, as if I had a “head start” on healthy lifestyle practices. I have learned how to develop good sleep habits, avoid drugs and alcohol, and plan ahead for upcoming stressors. These lifestyle factors are important for everyone, and I got to practice them from a younger age when the consequences of missing a week of school were less severe. For example, when I was diagnosed, I had to learn how to fall asleep under stressful situations, when my mind was active. Six years later, now some of my friends are complaining about troubles falling asleep due to university stress, but this is something I've already learned how to deal with.

QUESTION 6

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Narrative 4

I personally think that given a strong support system with sufficient access to the necessary healthcare services, it is possible for plenty of positives to come from having bipolar disorder. When I look back to the time of my diagnosis, I can think of plenty of benefits which I most likely never would have had if not diagnosed with bipolar disorder and put in Dr. Goldstein's care.

Had I not been diagnosed bipolar disorder, I never would have received the help that I needed for all my inner struggles, some of which may not necessarily be directly related to having bipolar disorder. My social anxiety might have never been treated, or treated far later than it should have been. I received therapy that unscrambled many illogical worries which were limiting my personal development. I shifted my teenage mindset back to the mindset I had before I felt the pressure to fit in. This allowed me to become more caring, understanding, and empathetic towards people who are struggling. I even learned to not judge others for unwarranted behaviour, realizing that it's often due to a dissatisfaction with how their lives are going; likely because of a lack of access to help that they need. Being diagnosed led to a very important realization by my mom, and shortly after by me, that we need to take better care of our mental health. Having bipolar disorder teaches you to emphasize things that others may not dedicate their time to. We know that if we want to do well in life and not only survive but thrive with bipolar disorder, we need to be mindful of our needs and responsibilities. For example, we need to dedicate time to our mental health by taking breaks when we recognize an increase in stress levels, and limit the use of alcohol and cannabis which may distract us from our schedule, as falling behind might be more challenging for us. Youth without bipolar disorder often don't have to worry as much about consequences for most of these things, so even if they are working on themselves and taking their futures seriously, working hard on their health isn't as much of a priority, and so they don't get as much of the mental (and physical) benefits of consistent self-improvement as someone for whom these things are crucial, such as youth with bipolar disorder.

QUESTION 6

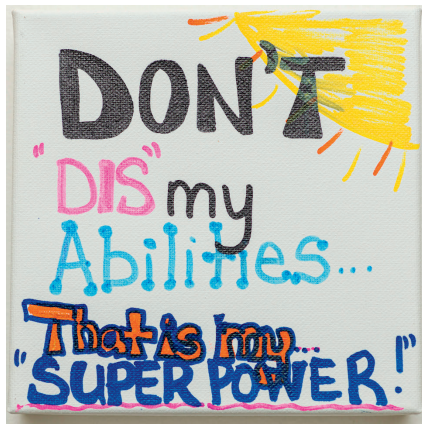
Do you perceive there to be any benefits to having bipolar disorder? Is there something positive that came out of receiving your diagnosis?

Narrative 4 cont'd

I hope this doesn't sound disrespectful to people who are struggling from bipolar disorder, but I think that overall, almost nothing negative came out of receiving my diagnosis in the long term. Had I not been diagnosed, there would have been so many more negatives with much more severe consequences.

At the end of the day, when it comes to finding the positives about being bipolar, it depends on how you feel about the limitations, medication side effects, and the label placed on you by the diagnosis.

Personally, I never found anything shameful or embarrassing about having bipolar disorder. The only limitations I can think of for myself feel more like a restricting line on the right path which is only there to make sure I don't make a U-turn. There are many things that aren't fair when it comes to each individual's experience with having bipolar disorder, especially soon after the episode that led to the diagnosis. However, my combination of gratitude for the help I get to receive, the initial pain that made me both a better and stronger person, and the healthy path that I feel compelled to take, made the negative aspects seem so minor that when I do think of my diagnosis, I don't feel like I have anything I want to complain about.



Question: Do you perceive there to be any benefits to having bipolar disorder? Is there something positive that came out of receiving your diagnosis?

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QUESTION 7

How should I approach/engage in appointments with my psychiatrist?
What helpful tips can you share, especially with someone who has recently been diagnosed with bipolar disorder?

Narrative 1

I don't think I was making the most of my appointments with Dr. Goldstein for quite some time, for a variety of reasons. I always felt awkward with any kind of doctor before my diagnosis, and I didn't completely understand the point of the psychiatry appointments, nor what I'm supposed to be talking about.

My advice for people who have recently been diagnosed with bipolar disorder and are uncomfortable and uncertain as to what they are doing at their appointments, is only to show up and talk about anything that comes to mind, regardless of if it's troubling them a lot or not. I have a feeling that Dr. Goldstein is quite knowledgeable about most topics regarding pop culture. This makes it easy for just about any teenager to find him relatable and opens the door for worry-free conversation. For the people that are in a similar situation that I was, I'd really only suggest trying your best to go to every appointment with at least an indifferent attitude. By doing that, you should reach a level of comfort and trust over time, and you probably will want to start talking about things that bother you, and then end up learning that those things are actually treatable or even modifiable.

Narrative 2

Go to your appointments with questions and write down any concerning thoughts or symptoms you have ahead of time. A lot can happen in a week, or even between appointments. Journaling by hand helped me make sense of what I was feeling and also helped me talk more openly with my therapist and parents about what I wanted to bring up at my next appointments.



Question: How should I approach/engage in appointments with my psychiatrist? What helpful tips can you share, especially with someone who has recently been diagnosed with bipolar disorder?

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QUESTION 8

Describe your experiences with receiving individual and/or family therapy. What was it like starting therapy and what have you learned along the way? What motivated you to attend therapy, participate in therapy, and/or practice skills outside of appointments?

Narrative 1

Starting therapy was a very strange experience for me. I'm sure that plenty of people are hesitant to talk about their feelings and the thoughts behind their actions, especially if they have been convinced that their behaviour is unnatural, unacceptable, and shameful. Something I had consistently heard when there would be conflict in my house is "Imagine if (a person I look up to) could see you right now. They wouldn't want anything to do with you anymore". Statements like these made the idea of seeing a therapist unthinkable. I'm still not exactly sure how Dr. Goldstein had managed to convince me to have the initial appointment with my therapist, but it's a scary thought for me to imagine the "what ifs" had it not happened.

As awkward as the first few appointments might have been, I didn't really mind because I didn't exactly understand how therapy worked. I believed the only reason I was there was to treat my social anxiety, which I thought could be done without really expressing my feelings at all and instead just waiting for my symptoms to magically fade. This made it easy to stay motivated to go to the appointments, as not participating as much as I could in therapy wasn't exactly stressful for me. Soon enough I began trusting my therapist, and gradually started opening myself to her about my insecurities and the thoughts behind both my beliefs and some of my actions. This led to a change, from a person bottling every single problem they had inside, to a person who now feels comfortable talking about almost any of their problems. Only because of this, I started making great progress with all the things I wanted to improve in and all the things I didn't know I wanted to improve in at the time.

QUESTION 8

Describe your experiences with receiving individual and/or family therapy. What was it like starting therapy and what have you learned along the way? What motivated you to attend therapy, participate in therapy, and/or practice skills outside of appointments?

Narrative 1 cont'd

Personally, when it comes to family therapy, I don't think it was nearly as beneficial for me as individual therapy. This is only because I never really wanted to talk about the arguments going on in my house. I always believed that the cause of all the conflict was a one-way street, and so I didn't feel like I had the right to complain about things that upset me. However, if I was to start family therapy again in the future, after learning everything I did in individual therapy and slowly learning to look at things from a third perspective, I think that the benefits for me and the people in my household could possibly be as great as the benefits I received from individual therapy.

I have learned so much necessary real-life knowledge and skills during my time with my therapist. Some of the benefits I experienced throughout therapy were: starting to challenge my fears; treating my anxiety; the increase in my willingness to open up to people; the decrease in assumptions I thought people had about me; and most importantly relieving the long depression which I almost forgot that I ever had. Some of the later results of my therapy are that I now have my own unbiased opinion on what is important enough for me to care about, I question the accuracy of my worries, and I decide for myself when my frustration is uncalled for.

I firmly believe that therapy is crucial for many people. Even if everything is already going great, therapy can still be extremely beneficial and can help lead to major upgrades in a person's life.



Question: Describe your experiences with receiving individual and/or family therapy. What was it like starting therapy and what have you learned along the way? What motivated you to attend therapy, participate in therapy, and/or practice skills outside of appointments?

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STRATEGIES AND SKILLS



QUESTION 9

How do you achieve and maintain routine/balance in your life (e.g., exercise, sleep, etc.)?

Does engaging in these activities impact your mood? Can you share any self-care tips or strategies and how they have helped you?

Narrative 1

I believe that no universal self-care plan exists, as it should be personalized depending on what each individual needs. I have two main types of self-care strategies: one for maintaining my routine and balance, and one for protecting myself when I am struggling.

My primary factors for achieving balance include monitoring my exercise, sleep and alcohol consumption. I also ensure that I maintain social interactions, including practicing open communication with close friends and family. Journaling is another great tool I use to check in with myself and help gain perspective. Seeing my thoughts written down allows me to appreciate the highlights of my day, acknowledge what I am struggling with, and let things go. I also find it important to do something every day that I find meaningful and fulfilling.

My main tip for protecting myself when I am struggling is to pay attention to my emotions and learn the warning signs for when I am not doing well. For example, if I notice that I get angry at things that wouldn't normally upset me, I take a step back and realize that something bigger might be going on. When this happens, I use these signals as a clue that I should increase my main self-care strategies and perhaps seek some outside help.

QUESTION 9

How do you achieve and maintain routine/balance in your life (e.g., exercise, sleep, etc.)?

Does engaging in these activities impact your mood? Can you share any self-care tips or strategies and how they have helped you?

Narrative 2

Sit back, here we go. Wake up – attach Bluetooth speaker to phone. Start with a morning playlist which is pretty hype, currently sporting Kendrick Lamar, Lil Nas X, Miley Cyrus and Lil Wayne. This helps me get beyond the difficulties of staying in bed for too long. Drink water. Sometimes I will start by listening to a motivational speech, or an excerpt from the Daily Stoic – a daily bite-sized podcast by the modern stoic, Ryan Holiday. Move to my indoor bike, which was purchased for \$70 on Kijiji and is very accessible in my room. Morning routine of back/core exercises. Weights are sitting there, let's do some curls, some squats. Sit down to meditate. Cold shower – sounds crazy but I recommend it. I've encountered few people who don't feel great after a long cold shower. The key to instilling all these habits? Discipline. In the words of ex-navy seal commander Jocko Willink: "Discipline equals freedom". How to stay disciplined? Well – what is the purpose of all this? Why am I doing these exercises, these meditations, eating healthy? For me, the purpose is so that I can become as healthy as I can be and share everything I've learned with people experiencing their own difficulties, as to ultimately improve their lives. How could I let down everyone else who is suffering? When I put my life into that context, taking the cold shower, or going on the bike is clearly the right thing to do. It took a while getting to this level of discipline, and I shouldn't pretend it's not a struggle to accomplish all these activities. My mind is constantly telling me not to, to stay in bed, or just go eat, and to forego these healthy habits...

Welp, since writing this paragraph my adherence to this morning routine has dwindled. That seems to happen sometimes, I get into a really great routine which improves my mood, and then eventually I give it up. It's all good, when this happens I just take time to write and re-assess. Was I trying to do much? Is it realistic to have this much of a routine every morning? I guess the lesson here is that life is non-linear, and I am continuously a work in progress.

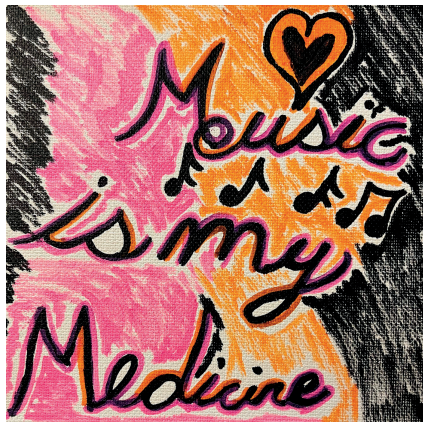
QUESTION 9

How do you achieve and maintain routine/balance in your life (e.g., exercise, sleep, etc.)?

Does engaging in these activities impact your mood? Can you share any self-care tips or strategies and how they have helped you?

Narrative 3

I currently do yoga around 4-5 times a week. I also used to play soccer competitively and run, which helped me balance my symptoms. I still like running but find it makes me feel anxious at times, and on those days, I prefer to do yoga. This is a completely personal preference, and I think trying out different types of physical activities can help you discover what works best for you. Doing yoga on a mat in a small space helps me calm down when I am feeling rough. I get about 7-8 hours of sleep every night and try to only stay out late/party with friends once or twice a week. Personally, I know drinking can be triggering, and I avoid drugs like the plague. Historically, I've found that I can manage how much I drink and know the effect alcohol has on me, though others may have a different response. In contrast, I find I can't control what drugs do to my mind and also find myself feeling very anxious or sad after using them. They are just not helpful to my mental state. I feel like I can directly pinpoint times where smoking cannabis has triggered a depressive episode, whereas if I limit myself to a couple of drinks a week (not heavy binge drinking) I can manage my headspace. Therapy has been a major game changer for me too. I would definitely use your therapist or psychiatrist to help you come up with a routine or plan for coping with your symptoms and things you can do to prevent mood episodes.



Question: How do you achieve and maintain routine/balance in your life (e.g., exercise, sleep, etc.)? Does engaging in these activities impact your mood? Can you share any self-care tips or strategies and how they have helped you?

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QUESTION 10

How do you approach social situations that seem developmentally appropriate for youth (e.g., partying and drinking) but can be challenging when having bipolar disorder?

Narrative 1

I try to approach it logically with an assessment of risk and reward. Healthcare professionals have warned me about the risks of those activities and I trust their judgment and the research they've done. I can't really think of a benefit of partying and drinking that might be worth going against their warnings, especially since I agree with them. Although not partying or drinking might lead to slight awkwardness and some judgmental looks, I'd rather be able to enjoy myself without having to worry about a potential flare up of symptoms later. I'd rather just play it safe and not have to think about that at all so that I can continue to enjoy life while mentally well. Also, a tip to avoid drinking: get your driver's license and make yourself the designated driver!

QUESTION 10

How do you approach social situations that seem developmentally appropriate for youth (e.g., partying and drinking) but can be challenging when having bipolar disorder?

Narrative 2

When I was diagnosed bipolar, I had just started the twelfth grade. Towards the end of the school year, I started going to parties again occasionally. Soon after that, I started drinking in similar quantities that I did before I knew that I was bipolar, and I ignored/wasn't aware of the negative impacts of drinking with my condition. When Dr. Goldstein would ask me how much I had drank since my last appointment, I would always lower the real amount consumed on the given nights. I definitely lowered the amount of alcohol consumption by what would have been considered significant enough for Dr. Goldstein to have a talk with me about the potential serious complications.

Although I may not have experienced irreversible long-term consequences, I would definitely say that my experience with partying led to many negative impacts which I may not have realized at the time. Drinking a large amount of alcohol every weekend played a big factor in my dissatisfaction with the way things were going. I think it had a huge impact on my problems with emotion regulation, the lack of effort that I would put into doing anything useful, and therefore my outlook towards the future. Looking forward to getting drunk with my friends and having that as the activity I was most excited for each week would only end up making me feel less content about myself, and more pessimistic about all the unfairness regarding the cards I had been dealt. This is something that had not bothered me nearly as much before I started going out, and currently doesn't bother me at all. However, at the time when the only thing that I looked forward to was to go out and get drunk, I would consistently reinforce my harmful perception and attitude regarding the unfairness and "why my life should be better".

QUESTION 10

How do you approach social situations that seem developmentally appropriate for youth (e.g., partying and drinking) but can be challenging when having bipolar disorder?

Narrative 2 cont'd

Drinking also played a big part in slowing down the treatment for my social anxiety. Since alcohol would relieve all my anxiety-related symptoms, when I would try to expose myself to my more challenging fears, I would usually only do it with at least some alcohol in my system. This is basically just cheating, and has the same effect as if you were to cheat on a school test: you might be satisfied with the result of your test, but since you haven't really learned anything, you aren't going to pass any of the pop quizzes. In my personal opinion, there is nothing bad about alcohol for a stable bipolar person as long as it is consumed in limited quantities. I think that parties are both developmentally appropriate and beneficial for teenagers when considering the possible improvements in social awareness and communication skills. The problem with alcohol and high school kids today, is that despite what parents might be hoping, it's only a minority of teenagers who do not drink to the point where they look foolish. I don't think my problems with emotion regulation, attitude, and my negative outlook towards the future would have been nearly as amplified had I drank two beers whenever I went out. Also, getting drunk can lead to an embarrassing situation for anyone, and I think that people who are bipolar are prone to react to embarrassment with more distress than people who are not. If I could answer the question, "How I think I should have been approaching these social situations", I would say that I should have went to parties where I would be comfortable drinking a beer, and If I felt too bummed out, uncomfortable, or bored because of the fun other people were having, then I should have stopped going to those parties and tried to hang out with other people.



Question: How do you approach social situations that seem developmentally appropriate for youth (e.g., partying and drinking) but can be challenging when having bipolar disorder?

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QUESTION 11

How do you communicate your needs with your parents, siblings, and/or friends?

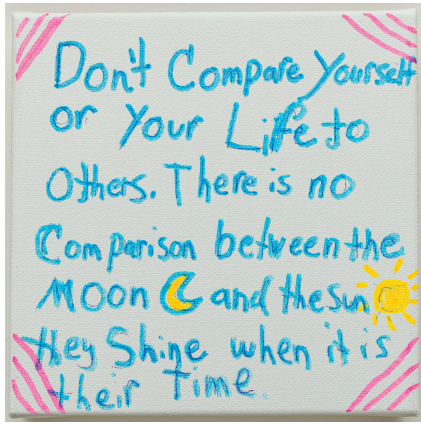
How do your parents, siblings, and/or friends help and support you?

Narrative 1

Years after my diagnosis, I am still constantly learning how to improve my communication with my loved ones. After my hospitalization, it was difficult to determine how to interact with everyone and what to tell people. My diagnosis was still fresh when I started university, and I had to create a support system from scratch without wanting to feel like a burden. I feel extremely fortunate that once I eventually opened up about my personal story, I was met with compassion and support. My strong fears about experiencing negative reactions and stigma dissipated, and I realized that I am deserving of a loving support system.

When I start to notice that I am struggling, I fight the urge to push my loved ones away and try to tell them how I am feeling instead. I still have a tough time remembering that it is okay to be vulnerable and that my friends and family cannot read my mind.

Acknowledging that you are not doing well, especially when it seems obvious to you, can be incredibly difficult. However, vulnerability is an essential first step to give people the opportunity to be there for you. It is also important to know when you can manage a situation with the help of loved ones, and when it is important to get advice from a professional. Additionally, I learned that the people in my life were able to best support me when I took steps towards being healthy myself (i.e., taking my medication and getting enough sleep).



Question: How do you communicate your needs with your parents, siblings, and/or friends? How do your parents, siblings, and/or friends help and support you?

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SCHOOL AND WORK



QUESTION 12

How do you approach major life stressors, like starting a new job, starting school/university, moving away, or beginning a new relationship?
What skills have been most helpful to you?

Narrative 1

I almost always create a 'Prevention Action Plan', either on my own or with the help of a therapist. I'm the type of person who worries about being unprepared for something, so having a written plan for various stressors helps me relax (even though most of the stressful events don't end up happening!). This means I don't get too caught up in trying to predict every single possibility, because that can be stressful in itself. For example, my therapist and I made a plan before I left for a summer camp in Quebec. We talked about difficulties speaking French, homesickness, culture shock, not making friends, and any other stressors we could think of. Then, we wrote down a concrete plan of action for each potential stressor. I never ended up having trouble, but it was reassuring to have it. On top of that, I always make sure that I have someone who can help me, in case something happens that wasn't part of the plan. That someone could be a family member or a close friend, someone who can recognize when I'm feeling overwhelmed and be there. They don't have to know any fancy coping strategies. As long as they can be there to listen and help me feel less alone.

Narrative 2

I am honest with myself about how I am feeling during an overwhelming time, acknowledging that life can get immensely stressful! Journaling helps, using the accommodations office at my university has been really great too. I think communicating when you are going through a rough patch is key to being able to overcome stressors. Exercising and sleeping, as well as meditating (which I started over the last couple of months) helps me calm down my mind and steady my thoughts.



Question: How do you approach major life stressors, like starting a new job, starting school/university, moving away, or beginning a new relationship? What skills have been most helpful to you?

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QUESTION 13

What coping strategies do you find helpful in school/academic settings?

Have you used any accommodations at school?

What can you share about your firsthand experiences with receiving accommodations?

What advice would you pass along to another student?

Narrative 1

Start looking into your school accommodations as early as possible (it might take a while before you are approved) and use them even if you don't think you'll need it. Just knowing that they will be there for you in case something unpredictable happens takes away a lot of the stress while studying. Don't worry about your friends or professors knowing that you use accommodations. They would all rather you be in the best state of mind for the exam and they don't need to know why you're getting the accommodations either.



Question: What coping strategies do you find helpful in school/academic settings? Have you used any accommodations at school? What can you share about your firsthand experiences with receiving accommodations? What advice would you pass along to another student?

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QUESTION 14

With bipolar disorder, symptoms can lead to inconsistency in energy, motivation, focus, etc. How have you managed any such inconsistencies in your own school/work life?

Narrative 1

Keeping a good attitude towards school/work throughout each year isn't exactly one of my strengths. However, I have improved in that area quite a bit. Recognizing the importance of a schedule and time management has been the main thing that really allowed me to improve in my ability to do my studies.

When I fell behind in school in the past, I would start worrying and then start doing something like avoiding logging into the school website or even checking my email. This would continuously add stress until I would end up becoming very upset and irritable. Eventually through pressure from my mum, and to alleviate panic, I would start writing out all my upcoming due dates and all the things I need to catch up on in each subject and prioritize everything I have to do. Now, at the start of each semester, I always write out all the due dates on a sheet of paper that I have by my computer. Doing something as simple as this has drastically improved my ability to stay motivated for school.

I have always had a lot of difficulty with focusing, especially when I'm not learning directly through 1-on-1 communication (which used to be very rare). I found it a lot easier to stay both focused and motivated when I had someone sit beside me. For example, when I would read PowerPoint slides on my laptop or write notes in my notebook, I would sit at the dining room table and have one of my grandparents sit next to me. They wouldn't be consistently reminding me to focus on the schoolwork, but they would be paying attention to me, and I would get a boost in both concentration and morale from the satisfaction of making my grandparents happy. Later, my dad would start tutoring me through Skype calls for courses that were related to his profession, making learning and concentrating much easier.

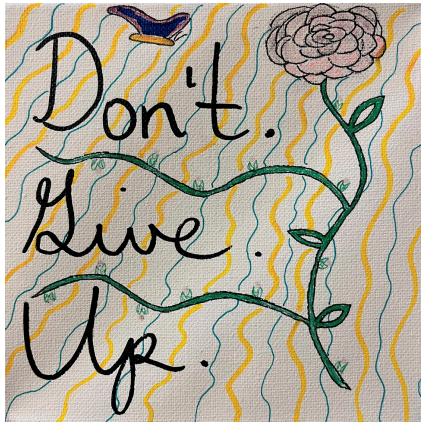
After quite some time of having my dad tutor me, concentrating on school by myself has also become much easier. I noticed that I have to spend time doing schoolwork every day or I fall behind in terms of both motivation and my ability to focus. By managing my school time with a consistent schedule, motivation and focus has become far less of a problem and drops in energy from over studying very rarely happen, as I don't leave things for the last minute anymore.

QUESTION 14

With bipolar disorder, symptoms can lead to inconsistency in energy, motivation, focus, etc. How have you managed any such inconsistencies in your own school/work life?

Narrative 2

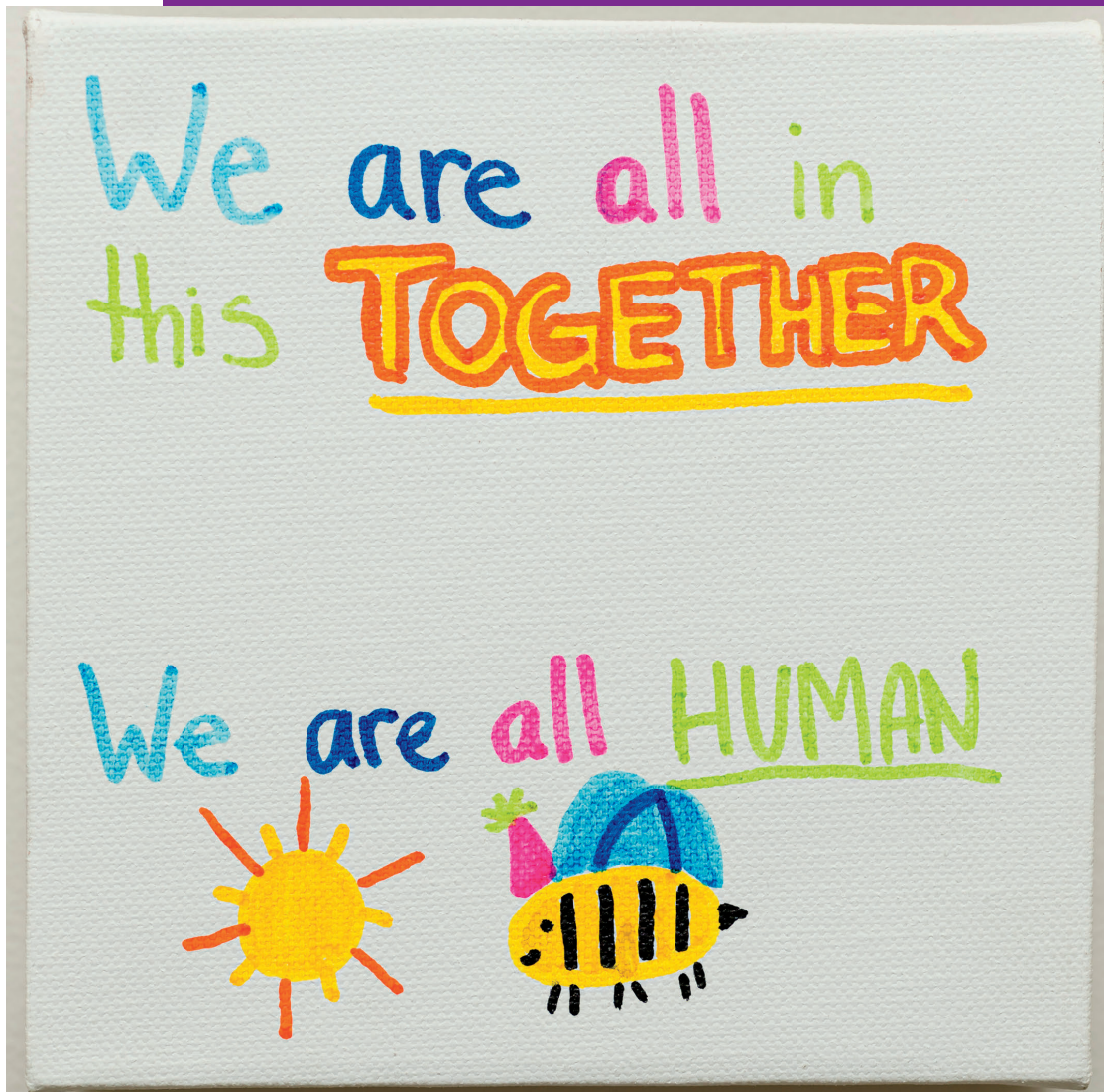
I have managed such inconsistencies by turning my difficulties into strengths. Focusing is a problem? Let me research, read books and study evidence-based methods by which I can increase my focus. Meditation helps, what if I meditated every morning? If I restrict social media and technology usage, my focus increases significantly. Energy is a problem? Let me figure out how I can tweak my exercise regimen, my diet, deep breathing exercises, and mitochondrial function to increase my energy. If that's what it takes, that's what it takes. If I must exercise throughout the day, so be it. I take breaks to breathe, relax, go for a walk and write down how I'm feeling. Self-talk can help too, since our brains strive to be congruent with the words we verbalize. If I say that I can do something, get a certain mark, my brain wants to follow suit. Sometimes it helps to say something that you're not yet. For example: "I'm someone who exercises". If you say that long enough to yourself and identify with it, perhaps you will then start engaging in exercise. Of course, you must physically do the task. When I really struggle with motivation I have a secret trick up my sleeve: motivational speeches. Listening to David Goggins, Eric Thomas and Jocko Willink will light up the spark in me, pushing me back on track.



Question: With bipolar disorder, symptoms can lead to inconsistency in energy, motivation, focus, etc. How have you managed any such inconsistencies in your own school/work life?

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ADVICE AND OTHER

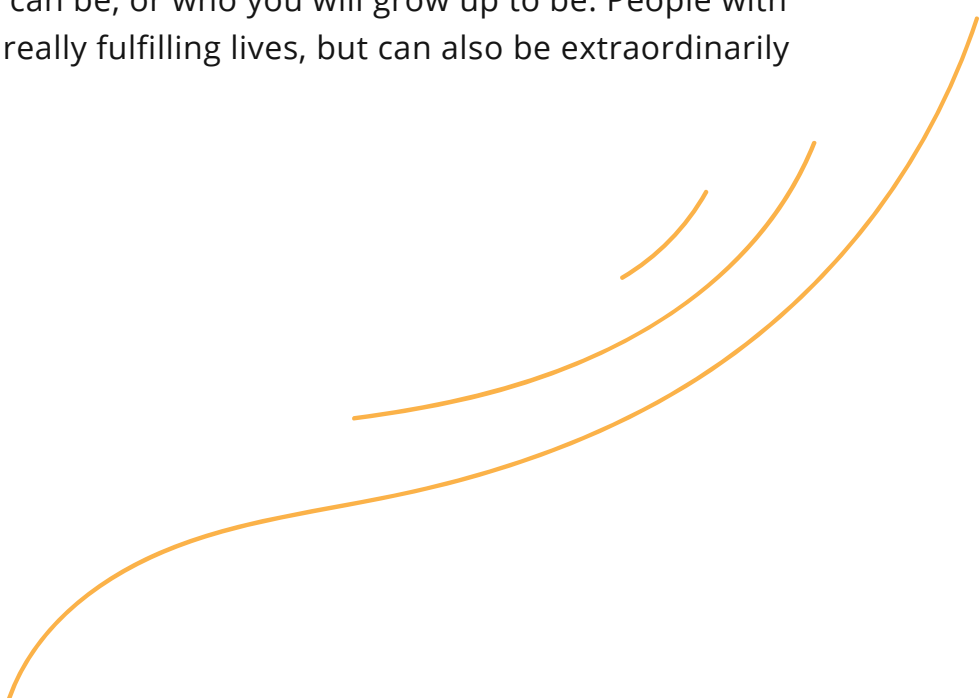


QUESTION 15

What's the most helpful advice you have been given by:
Your psychiatrist? Your therapist? A relative? A friend? A stranger?

Narrative 1

Bipolar disorder is just one small part of who you are as a person. Yes, it can be a pain, but it is also what makes you the incredible and only version of you that exists in this world (that can feel oh so big and scary at times). My therapist and psychiatrist really helped me put my diagnosis into perspective. Once I accepted the diagnosis and acknowledged what triggers have led to episodes in the past, I began to realize just how manageable my diagnosis could be. That is not to say I don't have bad days, sometimes you can do everything right and still have an episode or struggle with symptoms. But recognizing that having this diagnosis is just one minuscule part of who you are is the best piece of advice I would pass along to another individual recently facing a diagnosis. This is not to say you should not give your diagnosis attention, you should definitely actively participate in care and find out what works best for you to manage your symptoms. However, having a diagnosis of bipolar disorder does not dictate who you are as a person, what your interests are, what you are capable of accomplishing, etc. Really, you can have an amazing life, I promise! Just remember, your diagnosis is not the be all and end all of your life or who you can be, or who you will grow up to be. People with bipolar disorder can not only lead really fulfilling lives, but can also be extraordinarily successful!



QUESTION 15

What's the most helpful advice you have been given by:
Your psychiatrist? Your therapist? A relative? A friend? A stranger?

Narrative 2

Psychiatrist: Over the last five years, Dr. Goldstein has consistently given me great advice, usually by using interesting analogies. The best and most helpful advice was telling me that an antidepressant could help with my social anxiety, but I was really only going to get the full benefit by combining it with talk-therapy. Looking back, I still have no idea how he managed to convince me because continuously expressing myself to a person was something I never thought I would willingly do.

My favorite piece of advice from Dr. Goldstein came within the first few appointments with him. At that time, although I didn't completely realize it, I was very depressed. My mom was telling Dr. Goldstein how as a child, and up until my pre-teen years, I had a very uplifting presence. I think that I was much happier than most naturally-happy-kids. Dr. Goldstein ended the appointment by telling us that as long as I take my health seriously, he believes in a positive future for me. He then said something which made me question if he was very knowledgeable about his profession. He said that If I continue moving forward and avoid risk factors that could worsen my condition, I could one day be as happy, energetic, and positive as I was until my teenage years, and that "the grade five me is still in there". Looking back after five years' worth of psychiatry appointments, that piece of advice combined with his positive prediction might be the only thing Dr. Goldstein ever said to me where I did not have a single shred of belief in what he was talking about. And now, although I may not have the energy and hyperactivity of a ten-year-old, I haven't felt nearly as happy since then and my outlook on life is very positive once again.

QUESTION 15

What's the most helpful advice you have been given by:
Your psychiatrist? Your therapist? A relative? A friend? A stranger?

Narrative 2 cont'd

Therapist: During my three and a half years with my therapist, she had given me lots of great advice in terms of coping with stressors and working on emotion regulation. However, there isn't one specific statement that stands out to me nearly as much as thinking about the timeline of my personal improvement during my time with my therapist, as well as the improvement that followed, which was only possible because of the therapy.

One of my favorite things that my therapist did for me was introduce the rule regarding the "I don't know" answer. As I mentioned beforehand, I was extremely hesitant to even consider therapy, which means that I was also extremely hesitant to make the most out of therapy once I started going to the appointments. After a few months and a certain level of comfort was reached, my therapist told me I was not allowed to say "I don't know" anymore during the sessions. This had been my go-to favorite response to any question she had in regards to my thought process and not-so-true harmful beliefs. Once she initiated the rule, and then kept reminding me whenever I would break the rule, I started making really great progress with her in regards to my initial goals, which later led to slowly realizing the lack of validity in my harmful perceptions. Towards the end of my time with my therapist, I had noticed that not only did I not say "I don't know" to her for a long time, I hadn't used the response with anyone else either when explaining how I was feeling.

Relative: It's hard for me to think of helpful advice from my closest family members since I almost never believed that they were looking at my problems with a realistic solution. Because of this, I unfortunately almost never took their advice and I now believe that for the most part, it would have been quite helpful. However, I do like how all my close family members have some very specific and unique traits which I have been learning from and trying to implement in my life.

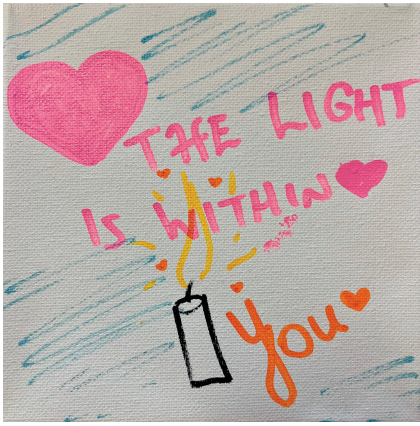
QUESTION 15

What's the most helpful advice you have been given by:
Your psychiatrist? Your therapist? A relative? A friend? A stranger?

Narrative 2 cont'd

Friend: I've always been very lucky to have my closest friend. He is the only person I went to high school with (other than myself) to never spread malicious rumors. However, it's possible that I only found it wrong to participate in that strictly due to the phobia of gossip I had, whereas he never participated in it due to his maturity and ability to differentiate right from wrong as a teenager. Thanks to his transparent and trusting personality, I was able to open up to him about my worries, and he would consistently try to reassure me and advise me not to believe in my inaccurate thoughts and assumptions. Other than being an integral part of my support system, my friend has always had (in my opinion) just about every trait a person should aspire to have. I think his emotional intelligence and emotional strength is very rare even in middle aged adults. Our viewpoints on moral and controversial matters are almost identical and for at least a few years now he has been a much-needed role model for me. This isn't a piece of advice, but by looking up to him as well as having him consistently and truthfully tell me "You can be whoever you want to be and you can do whatever you want to do" whenever I was upset and unmotivated, I have been given the belief that self-improvement is very possible, which I didn't believe in not so long ago.

Stranger: I don't really talk to strangers, but listening to Tupac songs has been very helpful for me at any stage of my recovery, for any type of mood that I'm in. "For every dark night, there's a bright day after that" is something he said in one of his songs that I now firmly believe.



**Question: What's the most helpful advice you have been given by:
Your psychiatrist? Your therapist? A relative? A friend? A stranger?**

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QUESTION 16

Compared to other mental illnesses (e.g., depression, anxiety), bipolar disorder often receives less attention and investment.

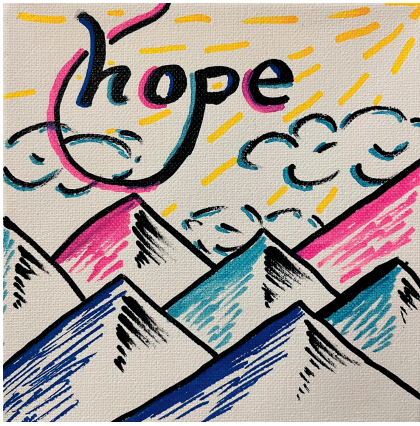
What do you think about this?

How would you like to see it different? What reasoning would you use to encourage increased focus on bipolar disorder?

Narrative 1

The only thing I can think of when it comes to media attention for bipolar disorder is through celebrity examples. When Kanye West was hospitalized in 2016, a few months after myself, I decided to take the opportunity to use him as an example to prove to a few friends that what happened to me was “normal”. I thought he was a crappy person for not revealing his diagnosis a decade earlier, and to try to serve as a role model and bring some awareness about his condition before it was made obvious to the public.

After he had made it clear about his diagnosis about a year later, and started making foolish statements and decisions, I realized how silly I was to have ever wanted him to open up about his diagnosis. I was very frustrated when I saw him making tweets about how he doesn't need medication and how he feels so much better without it. Although I'm sure he must have convinced quite a few bipolar individuals to make some really bad decisions, he served as a very good warning sticker for me when it came to being fed up and choosing to stop taking medication, or when I was deciding if I should smoke some of my friend's joint. I think Kanye's example is a problem, especially with his dominating popularity amongst the youth (compared to any other bipolar celebrity that might be out there). It's important for there to be positive examples of individuals living with bipolar disorder in pop culture to combat the stigma. What I would like to see differently for the negative and non-factual bipolar image circling the youth and therefore the stigma that's being added, would be for new role models to step forward and bring awareness, role models that can reach the youth.



Question: Compared to other mental illnesses (e.g., depression, anxiety), bipolar disorder often receives less attention and investment. What do you think about this? How would you like to see it different? What reasoning would you use to encourage increased focus on bipolar disorder?

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QUESTION 17

What message of hope would you offer a young person just receiving their diagnosis?
Or in the midst of a challenging stretch?
What message of hope would you offer their parents or siblings?

Narrative 1

Even though we often make a distinction between mental and physical health, a lot of new research is showing that there is a biological basis for mental health disorders. In other words, we can see it happening in the body and it's not your fault. You wouldn't blame someone with a cold for coughing, so you shouldn't blame someone with bipolar for feeling depressed. And just like having a cold doesn't define you, your diagnosis should not define you. It's not a disorder, it's neurodiversity. Neurodiversity is a perspective that brain differences are simply variations of the human brain as opposed to a deficit. Instead of being sick, I like to consider myself as simply being different than the average.

QUESTION 17

What message of hope would you offer a young person just receiving their diagnosis?
Or in the midst of a challenging stretch?
What message of hope would you offer their parents or siblings?

Narrative 2

It's difficult for me to think of a message of hope for a young person with bipolar disorder since I never believed the people who believed in me when I was a young person with bipolar. My message to parents and/or siblings would be that, my mom has put up with a lot of tough things and has also felt as much pain as I did during my depressive episodes. But, I think that if you know your child well and continuously learn about how to work with their diagnosis, dealing with some of the more challenging hiccups shouldn't make you feel hopeless. I'm not sure how often my closest family members felt like they lost hope, but I know that they never stopped pushing themselves to be strong for me, which was probably the biggest dealmaker in my successful recovery. My message of hope to the parents who are in the midst of a challenging stretch would be that I never thought optimistically about being able to change my behaviours, thoughts, and feelings, but the people in my home did, and because of their strength, the hiccups from my condition aren't as challenging anymore, and I don't feel hopeless or that I lack control in things I want to work on.

If a young person with bipolar disorder is reading this and needs hopeful advice: if you'd like to take my word for it, I was as certain that things weren't going to get better. But I am now more than content with how things are going and I'm equally as certain with my non-negotiable belief as I was, but the certainty has now flipped to the opposite direction: I know that things aren't going to go back to how they were or start getting worse anytime soon.

QUESTION 17

What message of hope would you offer a young person
just receiving their diagnosis?
Or in the midst of a challenging stretch?
What message of hope would you offer their parents or siblings?

Narrative 3

To the young person: You've got this. Don't rush the process. It will take some time, and that's okay. Trust your doctor, but also do your own research. Try not to get too distracted by people online who say that they can treat you through some alternative method. Psychiatry isn't perfect, but I believe that it's the best that we've got. Read stoicism and philosophy. Realize that millions of people have experienced this, and for most of human history, those with bipolar disorder did not receive proper treatment. But it's 2022, we have medication, exercise, psychotherapy, you can find support from forums online. That doesn't take away from your struggle, it's real, difficult, and worthy of empathy.

It doesn't seem like it, but almost everyone is dealing with something. Try to find allies wherever you go. Prioritize the health of yourself and your family. When you're going through this it may seem that it will never end, but this disorder gets better with age, experience, and medication. Find out what you enjoy doing and do it. It might be hard to restrict alcohol and drugs, but it's probably the most conducive towards your recovery. Be interested in yourself. What is it like to be me? Appreciate your brain, and the difference in people's minds. There's no good and bad, there's different. Why has life thrown all of this my way? That isn't the right question to ask. Instead, accept the challenges that life has thrown your way. The bigger the mountain you must climb, the more you are filled with satisfaction when you reach the top! Gather your gear, harnesses, and chalk. Tool up. Find your teammates to climb the mountain together. And take one step at a time.

To the parents and siblings: provide love, unconditionally. Make sure your child or sibling knows that you love them and that you want what's best for them. Work with them, do the research together on medications, on ways to help. Oftentimes it's more adaptive to celebrate positive good steps forward as opposed to scolding the problematic steps backward. Don't take things personally. Your child likely isn't choosing to do their maladaptive actions and trying to make life difficult for you or your family.



Question: What message of hope would you offer a young person just receiving their diagnosis? Or in the midst of a challenging stretch? What message of hope would you offer their parents or siblings?

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QUESTION 18

What have you learned about yourself since you were diagnosed with bipolar disorder?
What advice would you give to your younger self when you were first diagnosed?

Narrative 1

The main lesson I've learned about myself since being diagnosed with bipolar disorder is that I am stronger and more resilient than I ever used to believe. I've also realized that I am not a statistic or a label, and I do not have to fall into any stereotypical notions of what it could mean to have bipolar disorder. I am my own person with my own passions and skills, and I have everything it takes to live a happy and successful life. Once I gained an understanding of my illness, I was able to develop strategies to stay on top of my health and wellbeing. My support through CYBD is one of the main reasons I have been able to achieve this!

Looking back, I wish that my younger self was able to trust that bipolar disorder can be manageable and that my diagnosis did not have to shatter my whole identity. I became so consumed with trying to predict how others would view my new diagnosis that it ended up turning into intense self-stigma. I used to want to return to my "pre-diagnosis self", but I eventually emerged as a far better and healthier version of myself. Overall, I wish I knew that a bipolar disorder diagnosis puts no limits on what can be achieved and actually serves as a strength in many ways. My journey with bipolar disorder has allowed me to obtain a better balance in life and has sparked a meaningful journey through mental health advocacy. The more things I have overcome, the more proof I have that I can conquer anything – and I know you will too!

Narrative 2

I've learned that I am able to look at things from an undistorted and unbiased point of view. Because of this I feel better about myself in many ways and I now believe that I have as much potential for a happy life as I thought I did when I was a child. My younger self wouldn't have taken any advice I would give him. I'm not exactly sure how, but I would tell him to find a better source of information for his perceptions of people, instead of generalizing teenagers/young people based off a couple of bad apples from a public high school.



Question: What have you learned about yourself since you were diagnosed with bipolar disorder? What advice would you give to your younger self when you were first diagnosed?

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RESOURCES

INFORMATION ABOUT BIPOLAR DISORDER

Centre for Youth Bipolar Disorder

camh.ca/CYBD

The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health

camh.ca/en/health-info/mental-illness-and-addiction-index/bipolar-disorder

Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance

dbsalliance.org/education/bipolar-disorder

Mental Health Literacy

mentalhealthliteracy.org/mental-disorders/bipolar-disorder

American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry

aacap.org/aacap/Families_and_Youth/Resource_Centers/Bipolar_Disorder_Resource_Center/Home.aspx

International Society for Bipolar Disorders

isbd.org/patients

SUPPORT AND CONSUMER ADVOCACY

Hope + Me - Mood Disorders Association of Ontario

mooddisorders.ca

bpHope

bphope.com

Jack.org

jack.org/Home

Hope by CAMH (free app for suicide prevention)

camh.ca/hopebycamhapp

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for her inspiring comments

thank you

"*Never Alone* is an important guide to bipolar disorder for the young. It is deeply informed about the experience of depression and mania, original and sensitive in its approach, and will be of great help to those trying to find their way through a life touched by bipolar illness. I highly recommend it and only wish it had been available when I first became ill."

Kay Redfield Jamison, Ph.D.

The Dalio Professor in Mood Disorders
Professor of Psychiatry
The Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine

Author of the best-selling classics "An Unquiet Mind: A Memoir of Moods and Madness" and "Touched with Fire"