

In Harrison's Words

What Being Bipolar means to me.

When I was first diagnosed with Bipolar - I didn't know what the doctor was even talking about. I had never heard the word, "bipolar". I believe I had heard the phrase, "manic-depressive" but I simply could not relate that to myself. Manic - Depression had a connotation that meant 'completely out of it' to me. While I knew that things were not "right" I considered it an episode not a a life long battle or diagnosis.

The next phase of my acceptance was the fact that no one else I knew understood what Bipolar was. This makes things a little more difficult. I often said to myself, "I wish I were diagnosed with cancer - people get that!" No one really got mental illness and nor did I for that matter. As I sat in two different psychiatric hospitals, I couldn't bear the thought that this was me or my future. I had no idea, at the time, that my ignorance would propel me into a deeper and darker world of mental illness that I simply could not fathom at that time in my life.

I read up on the illness with diligence. I sought out material that would make me feel comfortable with the reality of the illness. A book that became very important to me was "His Bright Light" by author Danielle Steele. When I look back now, I can clearly see that I was searching not so much for the answers to what mental illness was, but for how I could explain it to others. Danielle Steele's nurturing and unconditional love for her son (Nick Traina) became of comfort zone for me when I could find no comfort.

In my case, as with so many - my first major episode of mental illness caused real devastation. Financial extremes and trust issues. At that time in my life, I equated success with money and I also relied on others definition of me to define who I was. With trust and money not only thrown out the window - I was at a complete loss.

I was also very sick and didn't consider myself as sick as the mental health community thought I was. I'm a survivor by nature and have overcome obstacles in the past, I had no doubt I could overcome this. It came to a point where the reality of my life had to define the fact that I could not simply overcome mental illness.

In underestimating Bipolar Disorder, my life took a path that, to this day, is hard for me to conceive. Yet, with so many scars, it is impossible to ignore. Bipolar is my enemy and a worthy one. I despise what I have allowed it to do with my life. For 10 years, I have despised myself for allowing Bipolar to control me rather than me control it. I no longer have that self-destructive perception of myself - though I do not underestimate the ability that Bipolar has to hurt me again.

We hear many things about those who are Bipolar. They are more creative, they are enlightened; they are intelligent and so forth. I believe this true, in many cases. However, I feel a lot of people would tap into these parts of the human equation if they experienced what some of us, with bipolar, have.

Rejection, homelessness, hunger, poverty, prison, rape, prejudice, hate and ignorance to name just few. In order to survive these elements of how low a human being can go, I assure you, you rely on creativity, enlightenment and intelligence to simply stay alive.

I do not love Bipolar Disorder, I do not embrace it. For some, this works, for me... I don't like it, I don't trust it and I fight it every waking minute of my life. There is no doubt the very fuel that makes me unique, even successful is the very fueled that can destroy me in a heartbeat.

Bipolar is a part of me whether I like it or not and it always will be. For that, I have to accept that what is a part of me, must work for me. While I fight the disorder every day, I also extract what I need from it and the experiences that it has provided me. My ability to understand people, to see through their actions and reactions does not come from a sixth sense, it comes from the fact I have lived so many facets of life. I choose to take the experiences that I have lived through and own them - analyze them, dissect them and understand them thoroughly. This, I do have control over and those experiences, I do embrace, I do trust and I do own. Just as I own my life and take responsibility for my actions - I also take responsibility for Bipolar Disorder, the good and the bad. It is a part of me and I refuse to hate me. I have experienced enough people hating me because of their lack of compassion and understanding. I have been hurt deeply by many for their perceptions and ignorance - I refuse to do that to myself. I also refuse to let Bipolar do that to others. My best defense to Bipolar and everyone's best defense to Bipolar is awareness. For far too long, the symptoms of Bipolar have been able to manifest with ease throughout the ignorant and the

uncompassionate. Me, being homeless, was legal because I was Bipolar, being raped, was justified because of Bipolar, being the receiving end of prejudice was acceptable because of Bipolar. Bipolar gained more power on me than I could have ever imagined simply by the fact that punishment was the answer. For those of you that believe punishment is the answer or believe that we, in the United States have a system in place to address the issues of mental illness, I encourage you to continue reading this site. What you do not know can hurt people deeply!

- Harrison Remy