

Mood Disorders in the Workplace

mad...adj. ... **1.** Mentally deranged; insane ... **7.** Temporarily overpowered by violent reactions, emotions, etc. ... **madness n.**¹

*'Today I felt pass over me a breath of wind from the wings of madness.'*²

I'm neither mentally deranged nor insane; but, in the black, wet winter of 2005 'a breath of wind from the wings of madness' passed over me, sudden as a tidal wave, and I became overpowered – temporarily (if you consider three years temporary) – 'by violent reactions, emotions, etc.'.

During that black, wet winter (and for three years thereafter) I did, however, *feel* mentally deranged *and* insane. I was at the mercy of sinister, obsessive thoughts and frustrating, compulsive behaviours; of suicidal depression and wild and frantic hypomania; and of excruciating red-hot anxiety – social, and otherwise – which pierced my mind, body and soul – especially in those lonely, dark hours between midnight and dawn – like an iron maiden: a spiked instrument of torture.

At the time I worked 40 hours per week at a telecommunications company (I'd been an employee – friendly, positive, popular, punctual, good performer – since early 2002), sitting on telephones in a CBD 'relocation' call centre (open-plan office, several hundred staff), day shift after day shift, night shift after night shift, listening to one customer after the last, all of them 'relocating their services (telephone/ internet / television) from one residence to another.

Suddenly, my role – once 'easy as ABC' ('relocations' is hardly rocket science), and maintained only to keep the wolf from the door (never a career move – I've always wanted to be a writer) – became overwhelming, incredibly tiring, and fear inspiring. As far as I was concerned, the one – the only – service which needed 'relocating' was my troubled mind; but, like a frozen winter lake, I did nothing. Nothing. Nothing to help myself. And so, like a bloody martyr, I endured.

Eventually, spring sparkled across Melbourne: rays of light, glimmers of hope pierced darkness and black clouds and rain. After two months of workplace tears and tantrums, mood swings and mini- and major-meltdowns (my manager Mr. X, his manager Mr. Y, and his manager Mr. Z, as well as work friends and work acquaintances were alarmed, mystified, but extremely concerned and well-wishing), I made an appointment with my long-term trustworthy GP, and was referred to a psychiatrist (who, three years later, I still see). The official diagnoses? Bipolar II Disorder, Borderline Personality Disorder, with significant anxiety, a hint of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, drug and alcohol abuse issues, and a dose of emotional vulnerabilities for extra zest.

Phew.

¹ The Collins Dictionary and Thesaurus in One Volume

² Charles Baudelaire; nineteenth century French writer/poet

Realising I required further support at the telecommunications company (after all, I had to continue working to cover outgoings: food, rent, bills, books and fun), I sat down with Mr. X and, in turn, with Mr. Y and Mr. Z, as soon as I could. I confided, I confessed: my diagnoses; my fears and anxieties; my suspicions and paranoias (my primary work-related concern was that I'd lose my job).

I asked for help.

Mr. X and Mr. Y (with whom I'd previously had easy-going and light-hearted relationships) listened to me like friends or like flowing, extraordinary saints. Both immediately reassured me I'd never lose my job because I'd been diagnosed with mental illnesses. Both immediately became available during work hours whenever I needed them. Both immediately became extremely generous with their almost-paternal advice. Both immediately became more caring and empathic than they were previously. Both went above and beyond their official workplace duties and responsibilities as my managers.

Both helped me.

At the telecommunications company I was granted anything (and I mean *anything*) I needed from friends and acquaintances and managers: a kind word, a cup of herbal tea, a neck rub, a hug, a box of tissues, a shoulder to cry on, a ride home; extended break or lunch times, a few hours, a morning, afternoon, a day or two off (for a sleep-in, a later shift start, an appointment to see my counsellor or my psychiatrist, or if I simply couldn't get out of bed, or leave the house, or cross the border of my suburb). Regrettably, the days turned into weeks, into months, into longer. But Mr. X, Mr. Y and Mr. Z, and my work friends and work acquaintances stayed in touch via telephone and email, and waited for me: patient, hopeful, encouraging.

After considerable time out of my role (almost a year and a half all up), and following a rather daunting and rusty return to work in early 2007 (20 hours per week – not mentally healthy enough, I lasted only two weeks), I resigned from the telco which had unfailingly stood behind and alongside me for five years.

Working at the telecommunications company was mostly like touring with the circus – never ending fun and colour and laughter and glitz and whirl – but sometimes working there was like living behind clear glass in a zoo: me a (bi)polar bear, my colleagues spectators. As such, they knew everything (and I mean everything: tears, tantrums, mood swings, mini- and major- meltdowns) about me.

I admit it was daunting – some days spine-chilling – to go through –so very publicly at work – what I went through. But I firmly believe my fearlessness about exposing my mood disorders to managers and friends and acquaintances in the workplace shattered stereotypes about those diagnosed with mental illnesses. I couldn't and I wouldn't recommend everyone do what I did – another call centre at another telco may be the perfect breeding ground for scandal and gossip, an absolute hotchpotch of rumour and stigma and discrimination – but I did what I needed to do, and, most importantly, I did it my way.

Nowadays, 'a breath of wind from the wings of madness' only occasionally passes over me. *Temporary means temporary*: 'lasting only a short time'³ – hours, days, not weeks, months or years. I'm currently not working – a psychiatrist's orders, my orders. Centrelink's assisting me financially (disability pension), and friends and family are supporting me emotionally.

Last year I finished writing my first book, my own memoir about surviving my mental illnesses, which includes my experiences in the workplace; this year I'm finishing my first novel, and a collection of poetry; and when I'm mentally healthy enough I'll complete training and I'll return to work: counselling those who are affected by mental illness.

In a crisis, help often unravels, like a magical ball of yarn, from the most unexpected places. For people affected in any way by mood disorders, support is available in the workplace.

All you have to do is ask for it.

To my managers at the telecommunications company, Mr. X, Mr. Y and Mr. Z, to my friends there D.,F.,M.,R.,S.,S.,S., and S., and my other acquaintances – thank you.

I will never forget.

The future's bright.

³ The Collins Dictionary and Thesaurus in One Volume