



ON LIVING WITH BIPOLAR DISORDER

Tony, Artist, New England Region (NSW) – 21/01/04



I was not diagnosed with bipolar until I was 46.

In a manic episode I was picked up by the police, handcuffed and taken to Armidale police station where a doctor took one look at me and said "Newcastle". I was driven down to Newcastle in the luxury of the back of a paddy wagon. I felt like I was a pig being taken to market.

From my teenage years, even though I was outwardly cheerful, underneath I had many insecurities and vulnerabilities. I sometimes felt really lost.

I would often leave jobs in a huff. I could not stand being contained in an office. But I always thought it was me, some flaw in my character. I wasn't steady enough. Everyone else was getting ahead. Climbing ladders successfully. I really became hard on myself and convinced myself that I was hopeless, a rather worthless human being.

My depression seemed to increase with age and with increasing confusion about career, marriage and so on. It seemed to last for months but it was probably only a few weeks. I would find a mistake that I felt I had made in life and then go back over my past and find all the other mistakes to support the fact that I was a hopeless human being. A top researcher!

My father had been in and out of Psychiatric hospitals from the 1950's. I really used to feel Dad's depressions when he rarely seemed to be out of his chair, eyes closed with a pained look on his face. I also recall having to talk Dad into going to hospital when he was manic. Dad's condition was never labelled. He just had 'nerves' and it was never talked about. Nerves were a sign of weakness.

I felt I might have a life like his.

But some time after my hospitalisation and in a time of depression I was somehow able to ask myself the question "Do I want to go on like this? Do I want to live my life or do I want to wallow in my condition?" From somewhere came the answer "I

want to live". I decided I had to find ways to manage my condition. I had to build an arsenal of strategies

I cannot say my condition is completely under control. But I believe it is manageable and I can lead a productive and fulfilling life.

- Firstly I had to get the medication right. When I got out of hospital I was put on Lithium and 20 mg Aropax. This stabilised me to a certain extent however I was still having bouts of depression. My Aropax was increased to 40 mg and I have had only minor depression since.
- I was a heavy drinker. After hospitalisation I gave up alcohol. I don't think alcohol and mood swings go together
- I have picked up useful assistance from counsellors and self help books. Cognitive Behaviour Therapy has been helpful especially as I am quite a disorganised person who objects to routine. It gave me some little goals. Firstly the therapist asked me to plan a week ahead. I found that very difficult and asked if I could just plan a day ahead. So I make lists for the next day. However finding the list can be a problem
- I worked with people with intellectual disabilities for 12 years. This gave me strength as I had to be on deck for people that were less fortunate than me. I was inspired by these people who made the most of their circumstances
- Friends have been very important. I was always surprised that my friends were still there when I came out of a depressed period. If possible I think it is valuable to have a friend who has a similar condition. So you can keep a check on each other
- Meditation has been a wonderful thing to have in my arsenal. I have no specific routine. But I have discovered the wonderful calming effect of breath awareness. It is particularly helpful if I am feeling irritable or racy.
- Sleep is crucial to calm the mind and I have no hesitation in taking a sleeping pill from the bottle I always keep beside my bed if I am tossing and turning
- I am aware exercise is important but I get rather bored with daily walks. I walk quite a bit during the day around my garden....and looking for spanners that I have not put back in their place.

- I feel a sense of humour is important. I have always tried to hang onto my humour and especially laugh at myself. This is especially so if I start thinking I am JC. If I get these feelings that I am JC reborn then I will kick myself with "Come on mate... get real... who do you think you're kidding. Have a look at your bloody hands. Not a mark on them".
- Writing has been important as a way of getting things out of my head and I often write quick letters to the Editor, Column 8, Big Questions.
- But I think the most significant development in my wellness has been my creative/artistic work. I have dabbled with writing and photography (with some publication success) for a long time. For the past 15 years I have been creating assemblages and collages from 'found objects' – bits and pieces I collect from the roadside or from the local rubbish tip, or from what friends have given me. I am fascinated by the weathering process on wood and metal and the marks and colours that are created. Having not had any Art School training I find working and playing with found objects and manipulating them until I get an artwork that pleases my eye enormously satisfying. No great technical skills are required. It's about where the eye feels something should be placed.
- I feel I can now confidently call myself an artist. I have had several exhibitions and my works have been selling. I have two exhibitions already booked this year, one of them is an invitation to exhibit at the regional gallery. But it is more the passion and the relief to find a form of expression that is me and which I love. Some people say that Lithium dampens the creative juices. But for me, before I was on Lithium, I would have heaps of ideas but they went nowhere, just into other ideas. On Lithium I am productive and the more I produce the more ideas I seem to get.

I feel I have come to terms with depression. It is hard but when I am in it I tend to say "It will pass. It always does. Hang in there....come on you've got through it before". I tend to sweat it out. I am also becoming better at pushing myself and saying things like "C'mon! Do something. Anything!" I don't always heed my advice though.

But I have also rationalised depression a bit. I see it as a bit like gestation or the process of germination for the creative mind. It is a time when decisions are not

ready to be made. It is a time when deep inside positive things are happening even though I am not aware of it. How do I know? By the fact that when I come out of depression I am usually bursting with ideas. It's like a seed that is buried in the dark soil to germinate. Maybe creativity has to be in a dark place to germinate and then blossom.

I am not over confident about managing my condition. I am ever vigilant.

But I really believe I can manage my condition and live a productive and fulfilling life.

But I think I first had to ask that Shakespearian question. 'To be or not to be'. And in deciding to *be* I *have* to manage my condition. I have so much to do.