

Polar Bears

Depression has the Black Dog. In our home, bipolar has the Polar Bear. A code word created between my sister and me when she was first diagnosed with bipolar aptly describes the illness and our experience of living with this 'animal'.

Polar Bears look cute and cuddly and most of the time, my sister is open, funny and playful. Polar Bears enjoy company, and my sister has a wide circle of friends, enjoys sport, movies and going out. Polar Bears are versatile, living on land and in deep waters, and my sister is managing her illness extremely well, aged 21, having had the illness since she was 14, attending university and singing in a local church group.

However Polar Bears also have a predatory side and this is when we see the illness emerge and my sister goes from gorgeous to grizzly.

From gorgeous to grizzly

The early warning signs for us are overreaction, over-emotion and extreme irritability. My sister is aggressive with my parents and myself and favours her friends over us. This is brought about by a lack of sleep and racing thoughts. The racing thoughts are ones of anxiety and worries such as being late, organising her room, meeting people, failing in her studies – all mixed up in her mind. As a result she stays up late and cannot relax.

My sister's illness is quite brittle. Within a couple of days she is in a full bipolar episode and a few days after the inevitable hospital admission, she is back home and in recovery. She has experienced far more manic episodes than depressive episodes. Seeing other friends with depression, the manic episode is actually easier to handle, believe it or not. Although it requires a higher level of prowess and fitness (like when her thoughts become too overwhelming, she decides to leave home regardless of time of night, so my family and I have had some stealthy midnight strides across the local shire where we live!), the mania is highly transparent. Depression is hidden and darker, we can't tell what she is thinking or feeling and it is far harder to help and takes far longer to resolve.

As the episode progresses, we also see a change in clothing: haphazard dressing where she tries to wear everything that she likes... all at once, regardless of weather and venue, like a haute couture model! The final indicator for my family and me is the episode's 'theme tune'. My sister listens to her iPod constantly throughout her illness and chooses one song that she will play repeatedly: J-Lo, Eminem, Dido, have made up our 'bipolar soundtrack' over the years.

It's all about the strategy...

In terms of management strategy, as a family, we are fairly experienced in our approach to managing an episode, as my sister has had about six instances of illness. Once we have noticed the warning sides individually and collectively, we check with her friends to see if they have observed any change in her behaviour. The change of behaviour is usually triggered by a series of 'small' events — a low grade at university, a disagreement with a friend, a summer job rejection. I write 'small' because as a family, we consider this to be small; it's a setback and we just need to dust ourselves off and get back on that horse. However, for my sister, (and from what I understand it affects all bipolar sufferers) that 'small' event is for her a huge event, as their stress tolerance levels are far lower than most people's.

When her friends concur that her behaviour has changed, we invite the local hospital outpatient unit to assess my sister. Based on this, they will decide whether to admit her and then begin increasing her medication to reduce the mania and calm her temperament. Slowly, her aggression towards the family dissipates as we visit twice daily in hospital and she starts to

<http://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/media/writingcomp/index.cfm>

appreciate us again (due in part to the influx of chocolate and McDonalds smuggled into hospital by Mum ☺, as well as the medication balancing her moods).

Our coping strategy, however, is less orderly. Despite my humour in regard to 'Polar Bears' and 'theme tunes', the illness is a very sad one, and at times, very difficult to accept. My sister has just reached her 20s and her teenage years have not blossomed as others' have, and opportunities and expectations have had to be reassessed. My parents, who have provided for my sister and me in so many ways, struggle especially, as this is one part of my sister's life they cannot 'fix' with advice, money or experience. We build resentment towards the illness when she is most unwell, for debilitating such a talented young girl.

However we try as a family to stay focused and put the 'cuddly' Polar Bear goal into our minds and know that the aggressive bear is just temporary. We support one another and are blessed with a bipolar support group, loving extended family and friends, accepting workplaces, and the hospital outpatient unit that is on hand for my sister's post-episode counseling, and family discussions to prevent the next episode for as long as we can.

The creative bear of brilliance

During every one of my sister's episodes we have seen an increase in her brilliance and creativity, but as a force, it is one that is difficult to harness. She starts painting when she is unwell, and paints with great depth and feeling in her choice of subject. This reveals the issues that have built up inside; forcing the emotion eruption, but often even through pictures we can't see what is the source. Her poetry and writing helps her healing and understanding of the illness, but are closely guarded and intensely private, so for us, we just have to wait till she is ready to open up.

She doesn't get burnt by her brilliance, but curiously doesn't return to these activities until the next episode. When she is well, her brilliance shines in other ways: a sharp sense of humour, a fantastic memory for trivia (she is in pub trivia team unrivalled in our district) and singing and acting talent that brings joy to all who see her perform. Consider her the Polar Bear who stars in a well-known Australian rum advert – hilarious and gregarious!

Silver linings to the stormy cloud

I truly believe things happen for a reason. I don't wish bipolar on anyone and frequently wonder why my sister was given this illness – a kind, sweet and clever girl who occasionally becomes agitated and unsettled. Humility is the greatest lesson we have learned as a family since my sister was diagnosed. Celebrating the small wins and setting achievable goals is the reality check that bipolar has given us. We enjoy each other's company more, make time for one another and do not feel guilty about relaxation. Life's pace is much more manageable and we demonstrate that to my sister as often as possible to keep her stress levels low.

As a family, our resilience has grown as we overcome each hurdle that bipolar has set us, making us stronger and more united. Others of life's self-absorbing battles, such as acquiring the latest material possession or being first place for everything, are now presented in perspective. Health and family impact now govern my life choices and wellbeing. I give thanks for my sister, my family and all those who touch my life in a positive way, which I doubt I would do if I were not going through this experience.

My advice to any family members of a bipolar sufferer is not to be ashamed or worried about what others think. Be upfront about the Polar Bear in your family – chances are the person you tell will know someone with mental illness – and, in my experience, we've yet to encounter anyone who hasn't shown empathy or a willingness to help and learn more. But most

<http://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/media/writingcomp/index.cfm>

importantly, love your Polar Bear unconditionally. The calamitous carnivore is fleeting and gives way to the cuddly creature time and time again. So whether your Bear's condition is hibernating or active, let them know every day that the fact they are part of your life is a blessing.

After all, just as real Polar Bears are living in an uncertain environment – with melting ice caps and hunting threatening their existence, so your own Polar Bear needs you to help them survive and succeed in the wilderness of real life.
