

Three Steps Towards Stability

Ryan is behind me when I hear him laugh. The sound of it sends a chill up my spine and my every sense is alert. I turn around – he has that look on his face, like a mask, and he is missing from behind his eyes. I dodge, but I'm too slow. There is blood. Afterwards, I sit with my heart breaking, listening to his anguished crying.

My son was fourteen and a half when he was diagnosed with Bipolar I Disorder. For the previous three years I had been describing to his paediatrician the cycles of destructive behaviour and intermittent violence that I was living with, to no avail. I sought opinions from other specialists, with the same response. Life took on the feel of a nightmare as my son became more and more violent and unpredictable. At home, where the violence was worst, I took to wearing a full face helmet in a vain bid to protect myself. In public, I would frequently suffer scratching and vicious hair pulling. Yet still, I could not get a diagnosis for my son. Why? The answer is simple: he already *had* a diagnosis – autism. He had been recognised as autistic as a very young child, and no one could see beyond that diagnosis. It seems such a simple concept, that a person can have more than one condition, and yet it proved insurmountable. All of his symptoms were explained through the prism of autism, and I was left to deal with the violence behaviourally, as if it were something that could be extinguished if I were consistent in my response to it. Then one day, the terrifying power of this condition broke free of any external shackles and completely consumed my son. With a fixed, glazed stare, he ferociously attacked me. The bad news was he spent four weeks in a locked, adult psychiatric ward. The good news was his bipolar disorder was finally diagnosed. That was five years ago.

Ryan's elevated moods don't manifest themselves in periods of intense creativity. Neither does he rush out to buy a new car, or gamble at the casino, things I have heard are usual during this phase of bipolar disorder. Autism has denied him the ability to express himself creatively, and his intellectual impairment means that he is entirely dependent on others to manage his life and to make decisions for him, except in the most simple of situations. The powerful 'high' that he experiences emerges as a purely destructive energy, hazardous for himself and everyone around him. He has little individual choice in how he reacts to his condition. Rather than set Ryan apart from other sufferers of this condition, these differences actually serve to clarify the process of managing the 'highs' that are an integral part of bipolar disorder.

The way I've learnt to manage his 'highs' comes down to three fundamental things:

- observing the signs that his mood is escalating;
- maintaining a good relationship with his doctor; and
- administering the necessary medication.

The more I think about it, the more I suspect that these things lie at the core of managing bipolar disorder for all sufferers. But, as in Ryan's case, I doubt that anyone can do it completely by themselves.

Because Ryan can't tell me how he's feeling, I have to be alert on his behalf to the tiny signals that would pass unnoticed by others, which I know can be the precursors to fully fledged mania for him. The danger signs include: a certain look in the eye, a calculating malice so different to his usual guileless glance; staring fixedly at another person, as if taking the mark of an enemy (does he hear a malign voice, warning him to be on his guard?); a pinch here, a scratch there, tears and contrition; the self-biting on the side of his index finger as he tries to apply external control to what is rapidly becoming uncontrollable; and the laughter. It's ironic that my son's laugh can be one of the clearest indicators that his mood is dangerously escalating. If there is a manic edge to it, or if there is just too much of it, I become immediately alert. While others are commenting on how happy he seems, I am watching him with apprehension. There's a difference between real happiness, and the state that mimics it. The latter will leave him shattered, with much distress and destruction along the way.

My vigilance is the first step on the way to managing Ryan's escalating mood, but – the second step – without the presence of a doctor who is willing to take note of what I say it would be in vain. I have come to understand that I am in a partnership with my son's psychiatrist, and the quality and consistency of this <http://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/media/writingcomp/index.cfm>

relationship has a profound impact on Ryan's wellbeing. I have a deep respect for his psychiatrist, because he was able to see what so many others weren't. When Ryan was first admitted to the psychiatric ward, the psychiatrist whose care he was initially under wanted him discharged. Like so many other doctors, he could not see beyond Ryan's disability to the mental illness that had him in its grip, and declared that he was 'the problem of Disability Services Commission, not the Health Department'. It's frightening to think that Ryan could get as far as being admitted to a psychiatric hospital, and still nearly slip through the net. Thank God for second opinions. Five years on from that dreadful time, Ryan is still seeing the psychiatrist who diagnosed his condition. He sees him as soon as I feel concerned that his mood is escalating, but, just as importantly, he also sees him when he is perfectly well. This consistent relationship bestows dignity on my son; he's a person, not just a set of symptoms.

The third step to managing the 'highs' of my son's bipolar disorder is the use of drugs. I am well aware that without mood stabilisers and antipsychotic medication my son would have only the very darkest of futures. In fact, I saw his future, when he was being pumped full of tranquillisers in an effort to chemically restrain him, and he was about to be turfed out of hospital, violent and deranged. I saw his future then, and it was very, very bleak. At the tender age of fourteen, he was to be condemned to a life of misery and isolation. Seeing his response to appropriate medication was absolutely startling. Slowly, but steadily, my son came back. Witnessing this has had a profound effect on me, and upon how I view the drugs he takes: they may not be perfect, but at least they exist. Yes, the side effects of shaking hands and weight gain have been hard to watch, but would any of us willingly revert to a time when the best treatment sufferers could hope for was cold baths and confinement? Two years after his initial hospitalisation his psychiatrist swapped one of his medications for a similar one in an effort to reduce his ballooning weight. The kilos dropped off him, but unfortunately his mood escalated out of control, and he spent three weeks in hospital. Back he went onto the original medication, back went the weight, but I had learnt a little more about how high the stakes are in dealing with this illness. Medication has not cured Ryan of bipolar disorder, but it has to a large extent shielded him from the worst it could inflict. When the signals that his mood is escalating emerge and it's clear they are not going away, the only thing that might be able to make a difference is medication.

My son is nearly twenty now, and for the last year he has been absolutely, continuously stable. I'm still watching for those signals, but – touch wood – they are staying away, at least for now. The joy I feel at having my son back is indescribable. It's like meeting him all over again. We've been able to cut back, cautiously, on his medication, and he is once more slim and full of energy, but it's 'good' energy, not the destructive force which drove him before. I know that his mood could start to escalate tomorrow – that's the nature of bipolar disorder. I can't cure my son of this condition but at least I've come to understand that I have some power over its course. I can fight for him by watching for the danger signals, keeping him in touch with his doctor, and making sure he has the best medication that is currently available. And should I need a reminder of the value of what I'm fighting for, I need only listen to his carefree laughter.