

## Learning to Live, Not Suffer

*The drugs that didn't get away*

A simple poem saved my life. It wasn't a poem written by Shakespeare, Milton or Keats or even a witty rendition from Goodfellow. The disjointed words, the fractured rhyme and scribbles in the margins came from my own pen. I am no journalist or paper writer so to do such a thing in my state of mind was quite odd. I don't really believe in miracles but me writing that day did come close in hindsight.

The actual words I wrote weren't all that poignant to anyone other than myself; it was all about a ticking clock and wasted time. I am bi-polar and of course the wasted moments were the dark spots in my daily life. I could lose whole weeks and even months to those black spots and I am sure others know what I mean.

After my initial diagnosis with the condition the stigma of my mental health became a real issue that just didn't go away with the taking of a pill; though they did help, and continue to help me function in our dysfunctional society. It was hard to offer an opinion only to have it slapped away with an off handed remark about me having mental problems or that I should seek further mental help. These remarks only fueled the decline in my health and state of being. In a hospital, fighting for my grip on the, so called, normal world, I made a decision. It was nothing startling. In fact it was a dull moment in my room of two months. If I wanted

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to get better, to be strong enough to wear the remarks of others, I had to understand what was happening to me. I started writing my thoughts down. At times they were erratic, dark, depressing things that seemed to stick to the end of my pen as I dragged it across the page. On rare occasions the musings were of laughter, friends and love, but all were disjointed, haphazard doodlings that seemed to bleed like a a thick syrup from my mind.

The ticking clock poem, one of my first to make any real sense, helped me understand something about my illness. I didn't have to let it rule my life, the time I had, and I didn't have to live in an eternal depressed or drugged out dumbness. There were choices open to me, many choices, and most, if not all, were beneficial to my health and future. The first was to not only take my medication but to really understand what it was doing for me. There are many views on medications but I have come to know and understand fully what I am like when I don't take them. A very tough lesson and a very tough thing to accept when I was still so young.

The poems I wrote daily helped me monitor my mood and pick up on what I considered unreasonable thoughts. Looking at a window and thinking 'It's dirty.' is reasonable. Looking at the window and thinking. 'I want to put my fist through it.' is unreasonable. Simple when you start to accept a few things about yourself and how your mind works.

Cognitive therapy became my next and perhaps best active choice. It is fine to take drugs to rectify the unhappiness and the massive mood swings – the highs and the deep lows – but it is another to learn what created them in the first place and then slowly undo all those unhelpful bits of your past. The future

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doesn't need to become a repeat of yesterday. The great Anthony Robbins, business and personal motivator, once said. 'The past does not equal the future'. Oh how true this statement is. Every day is a new future come to life, a new start. Some of those days weren't all that bright, but I now understood that everyone has a bad day or two, so I sat back and rode with the tide for a bit and soon the brightness returned. You don't have to be UP all the time just as much as you don't have to be DOWN all the time. Most of the time I am pretty neutral, pretty much like rest of the world's population.

After a twenty week course in cognitive restructuring I came face to face with the tiny piece of the past that became the foundation of my life. I was responsible for my baby brother's, Scott's, death. At the age of two I had blamed myself for his succumbing to Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) and as a result I cemented into my child's understanding 'I am no good' . For thirty two years I'd lived a child's understanding of death and after twenty weeks I broke free of that belief.

After the course I discovered it was time I rectified my past so it didn't equal my new future.

I thought the process of changing this deep thought, or as it is known, core belief, would be tantamount to raising the Titanic, but it turned out to be a small change of words, nothing dramatic, nothing complex. I exchange 'I am no good' for 'I'm as good as anyone else'

There were no miracles performed that day but it was a start – I took a baby step forward and took control of my life. The new thinking helped me move from heavy suppressive medication to the new (yes, stronger) anti psychotic and anti depressant drugs.

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These energizing and mind clearing tablets helped me to improve even further. The elation and freedom that came with this change in outlook and actions continues to help me when those dark days trap me in bed, or turn a warm summers week into a shadowy pit of despair. I understand the medication I must take (and due to my condition, will have to take for the rest of my life) and I am well equipped cognitively to deal with most stress inducing situations, even the guy who calls me a mental case when ever he drinks too much. By accepting the help of my doctor, psychiatric nurses and even other sufferers I now live a life, rather than simply exist under the sufferance of bi-polar.

There are no quick fixes or easy cures for my bi-polar and I am, by no means, clear of those dark woods or the frightening dreams that haunt them. I must live partially to a set regime of medications and regular psychiatrist visits. I waste no time with psychiatrist. We quickly review my progress openly and we try to set out a good management plan to follow. If new and better medications become available she researches them and if she feels they might benefit my situation we try them. Some work, some don't, but because we talk about the whole process while it is going on, management of medications is safe and measured. I only ever stopped taking my medication once - a very dark time that I never want to visit again. I need the medication, not all bi-polar patients do, but I know my own mind these days and I know what it needs. I now had twp working tools to make my life better.

The poems still come. What I write now are observational in nature - my view of the world - and they are as much a monitoring tool today as they were all those years ago. I have lived with bi-polar for over twelve years and that life has been full. It isn't

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easy some days and my children have learned to take it easy on Daddy when he's a bit down, nice kids. I consider myself lucky; lucky to have taken those baby steps, to have followed the suggestions of those trained in mental health issues and to have been able to help myself enough so that family and friends could build a support base around me. I think if I put all the weight on them from the very start I would be a very lonely person today.

It is true the ticking of the clock does not stop and nor does the passing of time, but so long as I take my medication, keep on saying to myself that 'I am as good as any one else' I will not die in abject depression or without saying good words to those around me.

As I look back I wonder if a miracle did happen. No one said they had to be big and surrounded by bright lights, did they. All it took were baby steps in the right direction.

And by the way, I don't *suffer* bi-polar depression any more, I have chosen to *live* with it instead.

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