



Beyond Bipolar

Piecing together an understanding of mental illness

Words Julia Wachuta | Photo Nina Kesic | Design Tyheca Stanton

I sit in my bed, pulling the covers up just under my chin. I don't want to go anywhere. I don't want to move. Maybe if I stay here, I will feel better. Maybe if I stay here, I won't have to do anything, or see anyone ...

What am I thinking? I'm totally capable of getting stuff done today. I'm happy about life. I have awesome friends, a great boyfriend, pretty cats, and this warm blanket ...

If I lie here, I will feel better. I can forget about stress and just sleep. Maybe read something. Ah, there's the sadness again.

My emotions have never been stable. I feel sad often, even though I feel confident, and I feel things too strongly. I talk too fast and too loud, or I sit silently in the corner. I am different. I have a mental illness called bipolar disorder. You can't tell by looking at me or even talking to me, but it's something I have to deal with every day. Most people don't understand how my mind works. There's a lot of pieces to it, but some are easier to comprehend.

5 Things I Wish People Understood

1 I get sad sometimes, and don't know why.

It comes as more of an uncomfortable feeling than a definite sadness. It feels like something is wrong. Or maybe something is missing? I'm not sure. Something just doesn't quite feel right. In some instances, it was built up over a period of time in which I was feeling neutral, not especially happy or sad. Other times, it comes after something made me happy. When the feeling comes, it sticks around for awhile. I tell my friends that I'm sad, or that I'm uncomfortable. When they want to know why, I don't know. Please don't think that I'm weird.

2 I want to be alone but I need people around.

When I'm definitely feeling sad or stressed, I usually prefer to be alone. If I'm alone, there will be nobody around to see that I'm acting strange. No one will be there to judge me. If I'm alone, then maybe I will feel better. But if I stay alone for too long, I will feel worse. I need someone to talk to, someone to understand and be there for me. Please be there for me.

3 I get angry very easily but it doesn't always mean I don't like you.

When I get angry, I get angry. My brain goes into survival mode. Not physical survival, but emotional. I need to feel safe. If someone upsets me, my brain tells me that the threat is huge. Maybe someone said something bad without the intention to hurt me, or maybe someone did something hurtful. Big or small, it's a threat, and I will hold a grudge. It doesn't always mean I don't like a person; my friends upset me sometimes too. I'm just trying to feel okay. Please don't think I'm mean.

4 It's harder for me to deal with stress.

If I feel too overwhelmed, I shut down. It's hard to get anything done. My brain tells me I'm not good enough. I feel like a failure, and sometimes all I can do is lie there. I do eventually get things done, but sometimes I need a long enough break to process my emotions and to be reassured that the tasks ahead of me are not too much for me to handle. Being around friends helps me feel better. It makes me feel more normal, like the things I'm stressing about are things other people might deal with too. These tasks don't really feel like something I could deal with daily; they feel like a heavy weight getting in the way of my peace of mind. Please don't think I'm incapable.

5 I can't control my emotions like you can.

Part of bipolar disorder is a lack of control over my emotions. My medication helps for the most part, but sometimes it's still too hard. I get too angry or too sad and I can't stop it. One time in my high school art class, I got the slightest feeling of self-doubt about my art pieces. They weren't as realistic as other students' work. I began to cry and I couldn't stop. I kept telling myself to stop and that it wasn't a big deal, but it didn't help. It felt like an enormous deal. Please don't think I'm crazy.

Living with a mental illness is no walk in the park. Some days are better than others, but it's not something that ever really goes away.

I once read a book that portrayed a lady with bipolar disorder as insane, and later said that there would never be any hope for bipolar people. It made me angry. It made me angry because I felt that the author was right.

After a little more thought, I realized that she was half right. There's no hope of curing my mental illness. It's one of those things where the medication will only treat the symptoms. The kind of hope that I do have is the hope of going far in life; not because I cured my mental illness, but because I learned how to live with it and push through it.

I've accomplished many things in my life, despite the drawbacks. In middle school I got a student of the month award six times. I won a bronze medal in the National Spanish Exam. I've had a poem published in a book. I graduated high school with a 4.0 GPA. I'm doing almost as well in college with a 3.8 GPA. I've achieved my dream of writing for a publication, even winning a Milwaukee Press Club award for my blog, "Student Sphere."

I've gone far, and I hope to keep moving forward. My bipolar disorder does not define me; it is but an obstacle in my life journey. While the journey is not a simple one, it would make life's difficulties a lot more inviting if more people tried to understand my mind.