



DE-STIGMATISE YOURSELF

By Sam Smirin
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I used to believe the world stigmatised me because I had Bipolar disorder - as if the entire world was even interested in my story. When I first received my diagnosis I saw stigmatisation everywhere - in movies, articles in people's reactions to my situation.

Then one day after many years it dawned on me - I stigmatised myself because I had Bipolar.

"You're defective," I told myself.
"Damaged goods," I constantly reminded myself.

"You're just an illness, another casualty to mental health illness."

Years of psychotherapy didn't help; support and reassurance from my family and friends didn't

dismantle it either. Neither did jobs I completed, relationships I had or the recognition of all I had in my life. The only way to dismantle my self-stigmatisation was to return to who I was before my diagnosis, resurrect her and then move into my current reality as Samantha living with an illness called Bipolar. There's a huge distinction in saying this and not saying I am Bipolar. No, I'm Sam.

It was a wonderful journey back to the source of who I am and dropping the programming I'd built over the years that stigmatised me to myself. Now I have published my book: "Life Interrupted - A Bipolar Memoir" (available on www.bipolarcoaching.co.za). I mention this here because I could never

have imagined, way back when I chose to stigmatise myself, that I could ever write, let alone share my story. In writing this book I re-examined myself, and realised my life wasn't just dominated by Bipolar. I also learned to turn with loving care to the part of me in the throws of illness, the part I stigmatised, and to love her, recognising her suffering wasn't because she was defective but because she had an illness she hadn't chosen and had done the best she could to manage it at the time.

People talk about forgiveness a lot. I believe the trick to living successfully with Bipolar is forgiving yourself for having it and for the ways you desperately chose to deal with it. I used to

Stigma

smoke a lot of marijuana and would become non-compliant with my medication. I used to take risks with people who were damaging to my life and I hated myself. Forgiveness for me is not something is an ongoing process you use to halt self-stigmatising. It's kindness, and kindness is supreme. Love thyself is possible and I'm testament to that.

There will be those who stigmatise you but they do so from ignorance, as they don't understand Bipolar. Bipolar manifests in distorted behaviour and there will be people that judge you for that - that's where they're at. But there are also and more importantly, people in your world who do understand and empathise with your challenge. These are the people who love you. There are the healthcare practitioners that support you - they are the friends that meet you half way. And it's your responsibility in these relationships to help them understand your experience of your illness so they can support you.

You're not isolated - the greatest stigma you face is your own. If you agree you're damaged you'll become that identity. It will stop you moving forward in your life, it might even make you give up on it altogether. Life is a very precious gift and there are places to go, people to meet, adventures to be had, paintings to be painted and books to write. A great life voyage to take - it's about taking the plunge and embracing life. You're steering your own bus and

your journey has just begun.

I've lived with Bipolar for thirty years but today I don't identify myself as Bipolar. I am a mother, daughter, sister, partner, businesswoman, bipolar coach, author, artist and support group leader. I'm also a useful member of society and a kind human being who empathises and understands how tough it is to live with a mental health illness.

We all hope to find the meaning

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of our life. My experience of living with Bipolar gave me the direction to do that. I entertained suicide and became stuck in the dark hole of depression. I lost my mind in mania and had mixed episodes and psychosis filled with terrifying hallucinations and delusions. I stopped taking my meds. And all these experiences helped me find my purpose. It's not an easy path but no one's path is easy. It's as if Bipolar was my baptism of fire and I enjoyed flying out of the embers as a Phoenix. Now I know,

and only because of my illness experiences and dismantling of self-stigmatisation, that I can face anything life delivers me. Nothing scares me anymore for I've been to hell and returned. I take this strength into my daily life and manage whatever comes my way. I've learnt to control my mind by working with my mind. I'm aware of feelings that arise and the moods that come. I analyse if they are valid thoughts and if they're useful for me to act upon. I filter my experiences and I manage my life well.

I'm aware I may become ill again, and I don't have an idealised idea that I've recovered. The idea of recovery isn't useful and puts pressure on me. Rather I say I am in remission. Bipolar can't be cured, but it can certainly be managed. It takes time to get over debilitating episodes and to get medication right. It takes time and effort to deconstruct diagnosis impact and engage in the forgiveness of self. It takes time to be courageous and speak out. It takes time to choose to disclose your status or choose not to. It takes time to find the right health care practitioners that work for you and to find an equilibrium to live your best life possible. I believe you have to know unhappiness to find happiness and Bipolar gives you that gift. No light without darkness.

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