



The Highs and Lows of Bipolar Disorder

A warm, comfortable smile spreads slowly over Marci's face and her eyes indicate that she has just experienced something deeply, but pleasantly, significant. Strange, I think, as I have just asked her to recollect one of the most difficult periods of her life, the time she began her battle with Bipolar disorder. "It's wonderful that I have to try to remember back ... it feels nice that it's no longer a vivid memory and that I can't describe it to you as if I experienced it yesterday."

The walls of this group room in the Intensive Treatment Services (I.T.S.) area of Portage Path Behavioral Health's Akron Clinic where we sit contain more raw emotion than the seventh game of the World Series, bottom of the ninth, two outs, full count on the batter, tie score. They've absorbed the anger from childhoods filled with abuse. They've soaked up the bitter tears of disappointment, uncertainty, and sadness. Today they bear witness to the radiant happiness of a life on the mend.

After moving back to Akron from Georgia in February 1996, this attractive, articulate woman was by her own admission "pretty sick." Totally out of medication (something which had never happened before), with no way to pay for her treatment or prescriptions, she sought help at Portage Path Behavioral Health.

"When I first arrived (at Portage Path) I was manic, and my intake counselor was so supportive and energetic, I got the feeling that something was really going to get done. It felt different from the other places I've been. Even though I wasn't a client and I had basically just gotten back to the city, they still saw me."

Marci says that although she used to wake up and struggle to find reasons to get out of bed, today her future seems much brighter. She cites some of the things she's currently working on - both in counseling and at home - and knows that her journey toward wellness is going to take a lifetime.

"The only way I've been able to get as far as I have is because I've had a goal in mind. My goal is to be well ... I want to be accountable ... I want to live a life of a responsible citizen - not trapped in the depths of depression or the highs of mania. I want to know how to live just like everybody else does."

Bipolar disorder (previously termed Manic-depression) is an illness that affects almost two million Americans. Portage Path alone treated 889 persons for Bipolar disorder in 1998, representing 14 percent of our total caseload.

the Depressive Phase

"A depressive phase, if I had to characterize it in one word, would be hopelessness," says Marci of the low periods of Bipolar disorder, her words echoing those of many others who have experienced this disease.

"The depressions are so deep and so dark it's as if there's no hope and no reason to go on. Even though I had come out of these phases in the past, every time it felt like it would never end. They get so deep and so dark that ... you just believe it will never end."

Marci states that in a depressive phase she would isolate and hide out, her mind filled with fear and shame, feeling like there is no reason to do anything or get out of bed. Symptoms of depression, as defined by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-IV), include poor appetite or overeating, insomnia or hypersomnia, low energy or fatigue, low self-esteem, inability to concentrate, and feelings of hopelessness.

"Even if you do see some light at the end of the tunnel, there's an underlying fear that it will happen again and again."

the Manic Phase

Just when she thought the heavy blanket of depression would never lift, Marci would be quickly catapulted to the top of an emotional cloud. Symptoms of a manic phase feel directly opposite those of depression, hence the name Bipolar disorder. Some symptoms of Mania, as categorized by the DSM-IV, include inflated self esteem or grandiosity, being more talkative than usual, distractibility, increase in goal-directed activity (either socially, at work/school, or sexually) or psychomotor agitation, and excessive involvement in pleasurable activities that have a high potential for painful consequences (e.g. buying sprees, sexual indiscretions, or foolish investments).

Remembering her manic phases, Marci says that her thoughts would come in rapid-fire succession, one after another. In addition, she had trouble sleeping, often staying up until 4 or 5 in the morning, which exacerbated her problems.

"The less sleep you have, the less you could cope with things that are happening, so then you run into anxiety and such. What's more, my thoughts became circular rather than linear. By this I mean that I didn't have one clear thought with a beginning and end, I had two or three thoughts that were constantly churning through my head."

Marci adds that she believes many people with Bipolar disorder don't get help because the sensations of excitement generated during a manic phase feel good, much like a "natural high."

"You feel good - everything is exciting - there is a "spark" to things. Unfortunately there was always a crash at the end. With me, the longer I was manic, the harder the crash (into depression) would be."

Finally, a breakthrough

With a sigh Marci admits that she knew her whole life that there was "something else" out there. She had been in and out of therapy and had tried numerous medications without the results she knew were possible.

"I had been to therapy in this area before at another agency but I did not have my diagnosis of Bipolar. I knew there was something they were missing. I felt let down that I had gone (to the other agency) for over a year and no one picked up that I was Bipolar, so I phoned Portage Path for help."

"My whole life has been a search for me," she says confidently. "I wanted to find the best in me and the best for me."

Why Portage Path?

"The difference between Portage Path and other places is that I've always gotten the feeling that I can come as I think I need to - that they're not going to "wind it down" before I'm ready. It's always on my time."

When she begins to speak of her therapist, Marci's voice becomes very passionate, stating emphatically, "I have come farther in my recovery with her than with anyone else."

When I began the interview with Marci, there were a few questions I was trying to answer, namely: Why has Portage Path helped when others failed? What makes our services different than others? How can we convey the intangibles that set our services apart?

Without even being asked, Marci answered them all.

"If I feel something's not right with my treatment plan and I need a change, they listen to what I have to say. My input is important. I am part of my treatment team at Portage Path - I am not just a patient. I feel that my life has changed because I have changed. I am not the same person I was when I walked in here."

Closing thoughts...

What would you say to those who fear the stigma associated with behavioral health care?

"People think that it (mental illness) makes you different. They don't realize that it could just as easily be the bank teller, the dry cleaner, anybody. You just don't know. I think that everybody gets to the point that the way they've dealt with things just doesn't work anymore- somehow they didn't catch up with themselves, and they just need to catch up in certain areas - a little nudge, a different way of looking at it. It's easy to get stuck in the same way of looking at things. I also wish there was another word instead of mental illness, maybe some sort of name involving wellness."

What does someone considering counseling have to gain?

"A new way of looking at your life, a new way of living your life, a new way of making decisions and having relationships. You have to use your fear to propel you to try something new. Anything new is going to be scary, but give it a shot."