

FROM BIPOLAR DISTRESS TO MY RECOVERY

BY

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In the Fall of '73 I began my slide into a severe depression, deep in anguish and anxiety. The following Spring I experienced an Acute Schizoid episode. This was my first manic episode. It presented a loss of contact with reality (psychosis) and interrupted my promising studies and work at the Cornell University Graduate School of Medical Sciences where I was in the process of conducting cancer research as a doctoral candidate.

In the Summer of '74, I presented part of my work to the Cornell University Faculty where I obtained a Master of Science degree. Although I had many obstacles to overcome at that point in my life, I remained motivated and attempted to complete my Ph.D.

The story of my recovery began in 1981. I was diagnosed with Bipolar Affective Disorder, Type 1, (Manic-Depressive Illness). Since that first depression in 1973, I have identified nine challenges that I feel are necessary to recovery.

This article will provide a testimonial as to what steps could be taken in order to start the recovery process, ultimately leading to mood stabilization and healing. The nine challenges are:

- 1 – To emerge intact from the steamroller of the first major depression.
- 2 – To wait patiently for the correct diagnosis.
- 3 – To accept the diagnosis after a period of denial.
- 4 – To gear up and decide to learn how to manage the condition.
- 5 – To find a Psychiatrist that you fully trust.
- 6 – To take your medication as directed.
- 7 – To eliminate drugs and alcohol completely.
- 8 – To adjust the doses of medications within the therapeutic window with your physician's approval.
- 9 – To seek support from among the following:

Psychiatrists, Psychologists, Psychiatric Nurses, Social Workers, Occupational therapists, Self-esteem workshops, Mental Health Associations, Internet Chat Rooms, etc.

From 1981 to 2002, despite mood fluctuations of various intensities ranging from hypomania, irritability and depression, this period of my life was the most productive for my family and me. I was relatively functional and was able to maintain the same job for over 20 years. During this time, I provided for my family and helped to raise four wonderful and talented children; all valuable and contributing members of society.

After my last episode in 2002, I embraced change and became an author, artist and musician. Volunteer work as a musician in seniors' residences was gratifying for me, confirming my belief that "giving of oneself without expecting returns" has its own rewards. These artistic, literary and musical endeavours helped me reach perfect Harmony within myself.

I was fortunate to connect with the Cummings Jewish Centre for Seniors Mental Health Program. Their support brought more stability and well-being into my life.

One thing is certain; in order to achieve my recovery I had to realize that I had to be the 'conductor' of my own life, my moods and attitudes, with the spirit of courage, tenacity and resilience.

My greatest desire is that the stigma about mental illness will diminish; eventually disappearing so that mentally affected persons can seek and obtain the care and support that they need: safely, freely, openly and humanely.

(Revised by Laura Steen, Port Hope, Ontario)