THE CATALYST

# Hiding my struggle with depression

*On Zoom I look polished; off-camera I collapsed. That's high-functioning bipolar depression: an exhausting, Oscar-worthy mask that hides real suffering, blocks support, and confuses loved ones.*

By: Jessica Ward-King | Posted: July 13, 2022

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I do my hair. Paint my face. Iron my blouse and press it just so. Earrings, a matching necklace. Glasses the complement the look. I'm ready for my close-up – in a Zoom meeting, of course. I am put-together and professional. Trendy, even. Successful.

From the waist down I look more like I feel – stained pajama bottoms and slippers, legs unshaven. I am barely able to drag myself from bedroom to home-office. Yesterday's coffee cup holds today's tepid brew. I am feeling down and depressed. Mentally ill, even. A mess.

This contrast is not lost on me. Day in and day out I manage to fool everyone in my virtual world. For 40-minute Zoom calls I am upbeat and on-the-ball, leading discussions and asking relevant questions. In between these calls, however, I dissolve into a heaping pile of wreckage, trying hard not to let my tears ruin my make-up. The second that I hang up from the call, the smile drops from my face and my shoulders automatically slump. I can't help it. It is all I can do to harness the energy to appear on camera but when the eyes of the world are shut, I revert to my depressed self.

I have high-functioning bipolar depression. This is not a diagnosis that you will find in the DSM-V, but a popular term we put to the kind of life that I am describing. For the outside world I am able to put on a grand performance, like the thespian wearing a mask on stage I take on the persona of someone like me, but a much more successful version of me. My audience never knows what is going on behind that mask, they see only the performance and, unaware that they are in a theatre at all, take that mask at face value. Literally. Unless they read this blog, my colleagues would have no idea that I am struggling as much as I am.

This is not something I can just turn on or off whenever I feel like it. I am compelled to perform like a circus animal. "The show must go on" is my unwilling motto. On those rare days when I am determined to buck the status quo, when I refuse to put on make-up or I wear a ragged t-shirt to work, when I insist on remaining quiet and deflated in a meeting, soon my resolve wavers and I wave off my colleagues' concerns with a more characteristic humorous quip, a coat of mascara and some lipstick and a scarf hung around my neck to hide how I'm really feeling.

High-functioning is less a choice and more an imperative – a symptom of the disorder itself. Initially masquerading as a protective factor, allowing people to remain active at work and in the community, this insidious symptom shuts the sufferer off from all outside help by masking the other symptoms of depression so effectively that no one even knows that the person is struggling. At home – the only place the person can take off the mask and really show themselves – things rapidly fall apart as there is no excess energy left for the partner, family, and

chores. This Jekyll and Hyde routine is as exhausting for those close to the afflicted person as it is for the person themselves, leaving families to feel confused, incredulous, abandoned, and unsupported by an oblivious community.

Even if one does manage to reach out, we are often met with disbelief – “Jessica? Depressed? But she’s too with it, together, successful, and downright happy to be depressed!” – and who can blame them? The outside world believes what it sees and doesn’t like the wool pulled over its eyes. Yet does anyone watching a Hollywood blockbuster think for a moment that the characters and the actors playing them are one and the same?

And so, I urge you: believe me when I say that high-functioning depression is real. High-functioning mental illness in general is real. Believe your family member when they tell you that they are putting on an Oscar-worthy performance for the outside world. Support your loved ones who are reaching out for help with an impossible illness. And if you are struggling with high-functioning depression please know that you are worthy of help. Even though you can still go through the motions and do well at work and seem successful. You are struggling and you don’t have to be. I know you feel like you are the only one who is feeling this way, but that is the definition of high-functioning – nobody else knows that you’re struggling just like you can’t see anyone else suffering in silence behind their mask. So, reach out for help. You’ll be glad you did.

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BSc, PhD, *aka the StigmaCrusher*, is a mental health advocate and keynote speaker with a rare blend of academic expertise and lived experience. Equipped with a doctorate in experimental psychology and firsthand knowledge of bipolar disorder, she’s both heavily educated and, as she likes to say, heavily medicated. Crazy smart, she’s been crushing mental health stigma since 2010.

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