THE CATALYST

Breaking The Stigma One Story at a Time

By: Jamie Rose | Posted: September 22, 2022

I was diagnosed with bipolar II disorder, exacerbated by postpartum depression shortly after my son was born. When I first heard my psychiatrist say I was diagnosed with bipolar I did not want to believe it. I had preconceived notions that people living with bipolar are scary, unstable, hyperactive, have split personalities and are not able to function in society. How could I be diagnosed with something like this? It did not make sense to me that a partner, mother, and teacher like myself would be diagnosed with bipolar disorder. My own stigmas surrounding mental illness and bipolar disorder stopped me from accepting the diagnosis. I was ashamed of this disorder and wanted to hide it from others that way I had been hiding it for all these years.

Accepting my diagnosis

It took a while for me to truly understand and accept my diagnosis. Months of therapy with a counselor and my psychiatrist plus the proper medication, helped me realize that I had actually been living with undiagnosed bipolar for a long time. I had been functioning with this disorder by putting a mask on for my audience. I finally decided to take off the mask when my son was around 5 months old. I was tired of hiding who I was and wanted to share my story with friends and family. My wish was that by sharing my story it would help other people living with mental illness know they are not alone. For months, I kept dragging my feet about sharing my story. I worried about what would people think of me and if they would accept me after they found out I have bipolar disorder. And this is what stigma is all about. Worrying about what others would think of me and keeping my story hidden was contributing to the stigma surrounding mental health.

For the most part, talking about mental health is not a part of our everyday lives. But what if this wasn't the case? What if we could share that we have a mental illness without worrying? What if it was as easy as saying what you had for breakfast that morning? Mental illness is not something that people choose. After I wrote about my experience with being diagnosed, I decided that I would become an advocate for mental health whenever I got the chance. I no longer wanted to stay quiet about my diagnosis because I have been wearing a mask for too long. I started writing to different publishers and speaking up to friends and family whenever I got the chance.

Breaking the silence

Stigmas are still strong in our society but the more we bring up the subject of mental health, the more we can begin to break the stigmas. I remember sitting at a baby mommy group that I have attended for several months. The group facilitator always started off each baby class with a light ice breaker question, asking us about our favourite movie or where we would like to travel. The moms and I always shared lighthearted answers to these questions. One day the facilitator asked

us to tell the group about one thing no one would ever guess about us. This was my chance to break the stigma and share about my bipolar. I went back and forth with this idea while other moms shared their very tame and predictable answers. Finally, it was my turn and I nervously said, “something that you would never guess from me is that I live with bipolar disorder”. As I looked around the room no one was saying anything or making eye contact with me, it was something that no one was expecting to hear. The facilitator thanked me for being brave enough to share this with the group, and she told me how more people needed to do this. By letting others know your journey we can start to break the stigma.

Mental health doesn’t have to be the elephant in the room. I am proud of the accomplishments I have had while dealing with a bipolar diagnosis. This diagnosis is no joke and for people to lead successful lives while dealing with an often-debilitating illness is amazing. Having spent some time on social media platforms, I have found that there are strong individuals sharing their stories. The stigma of mental health is diminishing because people are brave enough to talk about it and share. They are not sharing for attention; they are sharing for connection. When we connect with someone who shares our mental illness it gives us hope. Hope that we can survive and live with our mental illness every day. Our mental illness does not have to define us. So, if you are hesitating about sharing your story just do it; you’ll be glad that you did. Sharing your story with even one person who is going through what you are going through can make all the difference and is one step closer to helping break those stigmas.

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A longtime elementary school teacher and a mother to a beautiful one-year-old boy. When her son was born, she was hospitalized and later diagnosed with bipolar disorder, exacerbated by postpartum. Jamie vows to advocate for mental health awareness and to continue crushing the stigmas. In her spare time, Jamie can be found playing volleyball, walking her dog, and listening to 90s rock music.

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