



Ann Blond

A patient's account

I have wanted to write about this subject for a long time but have held back, fearing it to be not quite socially acceptable. But the bubble inside is ready to burst and I can wait no longer.

I am manic depressive. I have bipolar disorder. I was born that way and have suffered from it most of my adult life. My loved ones have also suffered, as life with a manic depressive can be chaotic to say the least.

The illness is brought on by environmental stress, which in my case was caused by the traumas associated with having an alcoholic father. Following the birth of my first child, I suffered my first bout of serious depression. This depression was, in time, to become my most familiar companion. At one stage it lasted for 6 months.

To the many well-meaning people over the years who have said, 'I've been down in the dumps too', this is no down in the dumps depression, this is a monster that sucks all the hope and joy and pleasure out of you. It fills you with so much fear and despair and paralyses your brain and your spirit until you can no longer respond as one human being to another. As a result, you crawl into a hole, usually your bed, where you cringe in anguish and fear and guilt. At my worst, I would wake in the morning with the realisation that I was still here and my heart and stomach would cramp up with shock and fear at the knowledge that I had another day to live through.

Unfortunately for the manic depressive, and their family, the depression is only one side of the coin. Until I came to recognise the manic side of my illness, I never came close to knowing what my problem was and what was needed to help me.

The manic side is harder to describe as it has many faces and moods. Lately, I have come to calling it 'being sparky'; sparky like a sparkler – bright, brilliant, witty, overactive, a real party girl, able to do just about anything; sparky like a

battery lead – biting and spitting like a venomous snake, full of hate and anger and bitterness.

When I was sparky I was indiscriminate in both what I said and did. My language was appalling and at times real physical violence was just below the surface. Naturally my behaviour turned my husband off; it was the only way he could cope. But this only enraged me more and made me more and more bitter. Eventually, these feelings would sink deep within me and lead to another cycle of depression.

Over the past few years these cycles set up a pattern of 3 months high, 3 months low, 3 months high, 3 months low. What a life. During these years I made several attempts on my life, not to get attention as some say, but to end the agony, and misguidedly to allow my husband and young teenage children to get on with their lives. I was too introverted to realise what my death would have done to them.

I also went through long periods of psychotherapy, the longest being 4 months. This helped but did not alleviate my problem. Years of antidepressants followed. These were next to useless and only added to my frustration and hopelessness. Was there to be no answer? After trying this thing and that, this way of life and that, I began to put things together and recognise the pattern of manic depression.

The next step was to get a doctor to listen to me! Thank God, almost 3 years ago I found that doctor, and have been on lithium ever since. I am closely monitored with regular blood tests, as lithium can be a dangerous drug. But oh... what a miracle one for me! For the first time in 29 years I have the opportunity to become a normal human being. There has been a lot of damage done, to myself, to my marriage – I often wonder what our love could have been like – and to our children. I pray that my boys have not been marked too badly. I am learning for the first time that not only am I beautiful but so is my husband; before seen only through twisted eyes.

My message to doctors is to listen carefully to your patients and keep trying to find the right drug or treatment for them, even when it seems all else has failed. Through the help of God and with the medication lithium, I am discovering a brand new world.

Author

Ann Blond lives in Western Australia and is an advocate for openly discussing mental health issues.

Postscript

Ann was taken off lithium after becoming toxic from long term use. As a result she went through many changes to her medications, underwent shock treatment, and suffered overdoses and long periods of depression. Ann was eventually put back on lithium and has been well for over 2 years. She has regular blood tests and is prepared to undergo kidney damage in order to have a full life.

Editor's note

This article refers to a time almost 2 decades ago and some things have changed. Lithium is more widely used and other medication options have broadened; there is also now an increased awareness of mental health conditions. Unfortunately other things have not changed as much as we would have hoped, such as delays to both diagnosis and to finding effective treatments, and the effects that mental illness can have on patients and their families.

Carolyn O'Shea
Senior Medical Editor

Ann's story was first published in *The Community Spirit* (Ravensthorpe, Western Australia) in 1993 and is reproduced with permission.

correspondence afp@racgp.org.au