

Bipolar Does not Discriminate

By Sandra

The knowledge that I suffer from mental illness is relatively new to my family despite the many black moments that I have been clawing my way through since adolescence. My official diagnosis of Bipolar II Disorder came in November, 2013. I have four children. When I was diagnosed, they were respectively: 16, 15, 13, and 9 years old.

Before hearing my diagnosis, along with other disorders, I had been on a slow downward slide into misery since the previous May, 2013. By November, before hearing the words “You have Bipolar II Disorder,” unable to handle the obligations of family life and work anymore, I took a plane, presumably to visit a friend on the other side of the country. My mind however, festering in a darkness so gripping that my reality consisted of the prone position under heavy covers, had already checked itself into a hotel room where my bedside table held the promise of peace in the shape of tiny, white pills. I never took them.

Instead I flew back home to my husband and my children, and told my spouse about the pills still stuffed away in the suitcase. Since a great deal of my time was spent shivering, swaddled under the blankets of my bed, I decided to share with my children why “mom is never at the supper table anymore.” Since my spouse had been extremely upset when we had left my family physician’s office, prescriptions for antidepressants and mood stabilizers crumpled in my hand; my husband’s torrent of tears only surpassed in his display of emotion by the croak of grief that escaped his throat as he looked at my eyes where the bags under them represented the horrific monster that clawed at me every second that I was awake, I thought telling my kids would be difficult.

Turns out telling my sons and explaining that I suffered from a mental illness that yanked me up one minute and threw me back down the next was surprisingly easy. My oldest son looked momentarily perplexed. I reassured them that I was taking medication that would control the symptoms. I will occasionally say to my husband that “the boys took that well,” only to have him tell me that boys are quiet in their unawareness and secretive in their sadness. Maybe he’s right. Hopefully I am.

Regrettably, my 13 year old daughter learned of my illness walking by my bedroom at an inopportune moment; watching a scene unfold of my husband leaning over me while weeping; his helplessness expressed as he clamped a hand over his mouth to cover the more ragged sobs; his pain as intense as my mental anguish, which paralyzed me and kept me the captive of my demons. My panic attacks, brought on by the Bipolar II, had me paralyzed and breathless as I awaited respite from the anxiety. Once my body had relaxed into my husband’s calming arms, my daughter was told what had occurred, why it was occurring, and more importantly, that I suffered from a mental illness which was as real as her friend’s mother’s cancer. As the roles reversed, my daughter climbed into the bed next to me, and took me into her thin, white arms; herself crying, and asking what we could do to make me feel better.

My girl has never been the same since. Several months after this scene, I still watch my daughter watching me as I shed tears of sadness or joy during a movie; her fear that the familiar haunting sight of my body beneath crumpled bed sheets always looming nearby. It saddens me that she's seen some things she can never unsee. I wish I could turn back time, and protect her...protect my boys from having a mother whose mental illness is as ravaging as a starving lion. But I can't. I can only use my Bipolar II Disorder as a means to teach my children tolerance and acceptance towards those with mental illness, and hope, that like me, they will develop an unquenchable drive to advocate for those who can't advocate for themselves.