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Personal Narrative

Bipolar Was a Cage-Recovery Became a Prison

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Abstract

This autobiographical narrative examines the relationship between bipolar disorder, recovery, family relationships, and psychiatric stigma. The author describes her experience of bipolar disorder, the psychological work through which she reports achieving recovery, and the continued use of her psychiatric history to question her credibility and restrict family contact. The narrative also explores her daughter's mental health difficulties in the context of marital conflict, pressure to separate from her mother, and subsequent estrangement. Its central theme is the distinction between freedom from illness and freedom from the social consequences of a psychiatric label. The account raises questions about how personal experience, family influence, and diagnostic interpretations interact, and how a history of mental illness can continue to shape a person's life after reported recovery.

Keywords: Bipolar disorder, Recovery, Psychiatric stigma, Family relationships, Estrangement, Lived experience.

Mother's mistake

I was born into a family already cracking under pressure. My father struggled with mental problems; my parents' marriage was collapsing. Mother didn't want to give birth to me but missed the abortion deadline. She used to call me "*a copy of the father*" and lump me together with my brother as "*two tails*" that prevented her happiness in life.

Those words burned into me. I grew up believing my existence was a burden, that I was "*bad*" and "*wrong*." I didn't trust even boys who said they loved me. By my teens depression had set in; there was a suicide attempt. During another crisis my mother tricked me into a psychiatric hospital where they treated depression with insulin comas. That was the beginning of a bipolar course with severe insomnia. There was no information then, no psychological help. I didn't even think of it as an illness: mania was "*life*," depression was "*payment for my sins*."

Becoming a mother

I studied, worked, got married, had a daughter, and divorced seven years later. In depression I worshiped my husband; in mania he irritated me. My mother only accepted me in depression, feeding my "*delusion of guilt*" and believing only in pills. She saw herself as the victim. I never committed any crimes; I only had a difficult character and many creative ideas.

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During one of those creative episodes, I lost sleep and went with a colleague to see a professor in another city for consultation and gentle treatment, leaving my daughter with a friend (relatives refused to help). My mother presented this as "*abandoning the child*" and again forced me into a hospital in front of my daughter. There they tried to "*treat*" me with aminazine and threatened sulfazine "*for bad behavior*." Only calls from the professor and the help of a colleague freed me. Friends advised me to escape my mother's control. We left under her curse: "*You'll ruin yourself and your daughter*."

Seven blissful years

We met relatives again in another country, and instead of help they reported to officials that I had hidden my illness on official papers. Free from them, my daughter and I lived seven years together. It was a time of survival in a new country, becoming friends, and sharing many interests. We read a lot and kept a healthy way of life. While my mother regarded my depression as a healthy state, my daughter recognized it as an illness. Her support dissolved my self-blame feelings during depression; the bipolar disorder itself weakened. After college my daughter married and moved away and I focused completely on my health.

Miklowitz describes a reciprocal pattern in which criticism and negative family interactions may intensify residual mood symptoms and contribute to relapse in people with biological vulnerability [1].

I was lucky to find a Jungian therapist who showed me a psychological path out of bipolar disorder. I worked hard and achieved results. He himself had recovered this way but never wrote about it, never spoke publicly. When I asked him to help me describe the process of recovery, he refused.

Salvation army activity

Meanwhile, seeing my daughter unprotected, my mother reactivated and a new player entered: daughter's husband. Having just freed himself from his own overprotected mother's control, he started controlling my daughter, forbidding our communication ("*if your mom comes, I'll throw you out*"). He started to humiliate her, pointing to our relationship, and psychologically abused her by his attitude. Mother filled her up with details of my behavior during Bipolar episodes in the past. This "*Army of Salvation*" began to cast my daughter as "*the victim of a crazy mother*." Also, psychologists preaching separation joined in. My daughter started to have depression and ended in mania. I saw the signs of mania in her emails, begged her husband to take her to a psychologist, asked my own therapist to support me, flew by myself there, but frightened by talk of "*interference*" I hesitated to act directly. It ended with my daughter being brought to me in acute psychosis; we admitted her to hospital.

Johnson's review describes evidence linking severe negative life events to worsening bipolar depression and emphasizes that depression and mania may have different predictors [2].

When my daughter got to the hospital, I calmly told her doctor about my past bipolar disorder and my recovery. I didn't yet know such confessions were dangerous. And that recovery "*isn't allowed*." I had focused on recovery without paying attention to attitudes toward mental illness. By then I'd been working in psychiatry for years. But

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diagnoses weren't the center of our work; we dealt with people and their problems. That's what interested me -solving people's problems.

Recovery became a weapon

But my son-in-law seized my information for a doctor like a weapon. While I nursed my daughter in the hospital, he was reading the internet. In his version my daughter's bipolar disorder was "*because of me*". However, she grew up beside a sick mother and without any support, but got married being a healthy and happy person. His negative attitude was a strong trigger, but I had no word on that. He insisted I take medication "*to support my daughter*". He named my recovery as a sign of schizophrenia, and threatened forced treatment. He clung to my diagnosis with a death grip even though we lived far apart. Communication with my daughter became extremely difficult, and her psychologist with "*separation from parents*" ideas added hostility. Everything happened behind my back, like in my work, where the clients don't know what's being decided about them and have no control.

Corrigan and Watson identify an authoritarian form of stigma in which people with serious mental illness are viewed as irresponsible, so that "life decisions should be made by others." They also note that stigmatizing views can be held by mental health professionals [3].

Mother-monster

When my daughter fell under the influence of relatives and psychologists, our open and honest relationship ended and the lies and slander began. When I demanded that my son-in-law stop manipulating and leave us alone, he completely banned my communication with my daughter and grandchildren. Before the ban my daughter was doing well on light medical support. After the ban she sank into a deep depression; her husband put her on lithium despite liver pathology and convinced her bipolar was forever. For her began years of "*bipolar swings*." At the same time, he "*restructured*" her psyche using separation scripts: my daughter renounced me as her mother (I found out by accident). She went to "*childhood trauma*" therapists and built narratives of a "*horrible mother*." In practice they assembled a caricature of me using the worst elements of "*bad mothers*" from separation literature. That image of Mother-Monster lives actively in her blogs. All of her husband's unsavory acts have been shifted onto me as a convenient Scapegoat; he is portrayed as the Hero and Savior. Perhaps it is easier for her this way, but it is not a worthy path.

Police and life sentence without parole

I decided to let go of that hopeless situation and to part peacefully. When I arrived, I found my daughter in a deep depression. Her husband was furious and forced her to cut off contact and go home. Soon the police called me, speaking as if I were a criminal: he said if I contacted my daughter by any means I could be arrested. He pointed to the fact I had bipolar disorder and "*was not taking medication*." The complaint to police declared: "*Her existence affects my wife's behavior and I don't like it*."

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Guilty of existing

I left the country. It's ironic: I wanted to free myself from bipolar disorder, to repair my relationship with my own mother, so my daughter wouldn't be caught in a family feud, and to be a good grandmother to my grandchildren. I wanted to be free from labels as well. But my efforts were in vain. Everything turned upside down.

Now the bipolar disorder is gone as an illness. Even under severe stress in recent years, the illness has not returned. I have lived a stable life for more than twenty years, but there is no satisfaction. I almost miss that condition, because life without bipolar disorder but with an official stigma has turned into a life sentence without parole. The inner prison of illness became an outer prison of attitude and it's not easy to say what is better.

At least in bipolar disorder there were manias where I could rise above "*who is who*" and the bureaucratic reality, move into another universe for a while. And between depression and mania there was hypomania as a natural nirvana. Now I have only cruel and unfair reality.

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