



Alone **NO MORE**

A young mother suffering from mental illness is determined that no others suffer alone

By Devorah Stein



I have struggled with mental illness since my late teens, specifically bipolar disorder. Although my struggles were very painful, I feel it is important to share my story in order to help others in similar situations.

It all started when I was 19 years old and in seminary for *shanah bet*. *Shanah alef* had gone off without a hitch, but now, *in shanah bet*, some of the girls were starting to date, and that scared me. How was I supposed to find the one person in the world who was right for me? I wasn't ready to date. Maybe attending seminary for a second year had been a mistake. I didn't have healthy role models growing up, so I was worried about my future and my eventual family life.

Then I began experiencing alarming symptoms. First I began having trouble focusing on my schoolwork. I would read the same paragraph over and over and not understand

what I was reading. I suffered from insomnia; night after night I woke up at 4:30 a.m. gasping for breath. I began to pick at my body compulsively, to the point of drawing blood. I was overwhelmed by the tasks involved in basic personal hygiene. In my particular school, we had to cook for ourselves, but I wasn't interested. In my confused state, self-harm seemed like the logical option.

The school called my parents, but by then the situation was dire. My mother flew to Israel the next day. There was a family history of mental illness, so the episode wasn't totally out of left field, but my parents hadn't recognized the symptoms.

At home, I was classified as clinically psychotic. I was put on medication but it took a while for it to kick in, so I did things that I would never normally do. I felt driven, as if there was a force pushing me to act crazy.

People who are in a psychotic state sometimes say things

that don't make sense. I told everyone that I was able to control my actions, which wasn't true. The doctors told my parents that if I could control my behavior, then I could stop acting bizarrely, and if I couldn't, then I didn't belong at home. On that advice, I was sent to stay with my grandmother.

I ended up moving in with my grandmother. I was still depressed and not taking care of myself. I didn't get dressed or shower for days at a time. I just kept picking at my skin, feeling as disgusting as I looked. Out of desperation, my grandmother checked me into a psychiatric facility.

I was there for two weeks. It was a locked unit, and I wasn't allowed to leave. I was permitted to have visitors for an hour a day, and maybe a phone call. There was group therapy and art therapy, but not much else. It was very hard. Luckily, it was during that hospitalization that an appropriate medication to stabilize my mood was found. and maybe a phone call. There was group therapy and art therapy, but not much else. It was very hard. Luckily, it was during that hospitalization that an appropriate medication to stabilize my mood was found.

ACCEPTANCE

My diagnosis has changed over the years, but right now it's officially "unspecified mood disorder." It resembles bipolar disorder, but with psychosis instead of mania. What they call it doesn't really matter to me; it's just what you need to do for insurance.

For me, acceptance didn't come easily. I didn't want to believe that I had a mental illness. I thought that somehow, once I got my life to a better state, everything would be fine.

One of my lowest moments came when my parents told me that I should consider that I probably could never get married. Nonetheless, *baruch Hashem*, I found my very special husband, who accepted me and everything else that came along with the package. He comes from an unbelievable family, who welcomed me with my illness.

I didn't begin dating until my condition had completely stabilized. My husband was the first boy I dated, and I was the first girl he dated. I decided to explain my illness early on, by the third date, figuring he would run away. He didn't; he only wanted to know how it would manifest itself. *Baruch Hashem*, I've never had to be hospitalized since getting married.

The medication I had been taking wasn't recommended for use during pregnancy, so under the direction of my psychiatrist, I was



slowly weaned off of it. With nothing in my system to regulate my mood, I sank into the depths of a deep depression.

It was then that I finally realized that I really did have this illness, and would have it for the rest of my life. I would always need psychotropic medication in order to function, including during pregnancy. It was a very difficult thing to accept, and for my husband as well. But by then we had been married for almost three years, and he stood by me 1,000 percent.

We returned to my psychiatrist to find a drug that would be safe for pregnancy, but she wasn't all that knowledgeable about the choices available. At that moment, I knew I needed to advocate for

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THE OLDEST PARTICIPANT IS—WELL, WE DIDN'T ASK HER HER AGE, BUT SHE ONCE SAID THAT SHE'D HAD THE ILLNESS FOR 50 YEARS.

myself and find a doctor with expertise in the field of women's mental health. After several consultations with different doctors and a lot of money spent, I was fortunate to find a new psychiatrist who would suit my needs.

TREATMENT AND COPING METHODS

My treatment plan has taken a multifaceted approach. At the height of my illness, I was hospitalized a number of times in locked inpatient psychiatric units. Not only did I need a cocktail of medications, I also needed weekly therapy to deal with all the emotional issues I was facing.

Today I'm taking mood stabilizers and antidepressants. The therapy has continued much longer than I ever thought it would, but my husband and I have come to realize how critical it is to my well-being.

Asking for outside help isn't something that comes easily to me, but I am fortunate that there are so many people willing to volunteer. I also have epilepsy, with three major seizures over the last year, so I haven't driven a car in a while. Although it's very difficult to accept restrictions on my mobility, Chai Lifeline, Bikur Cholim and other local organizations have all gone out of their way to help me with rides. It makes me feel cared for.

For me, the best coping methods are self-care, remembering that I am not alone in my illness, and that despite everything, I deserve happiness as much as anyone else.

Another good tactic I have found is being of service to others. Instead of wallowing in self-pity, I make an effort to reach out to others who could use a friendly phone call or act of kindness to

show them I care. This helps me to stop thinking about myself.

B'chasdei Hashem, I've overcome the odds. I've always felt that because I suffered so much in life, my husband was handed to me on a silver platter. I used to call him my "*matanah*." He's a wonderful person. I'm not saying he never has a difficult day—everyone does—but his support, and that of his parents, has made the difference for me in being able to live a normal life. Without them, I really wouldn't be able to function.

One time, after I was already married, I was off my meds and not doing too well. One Friday afternoon there was a knock at the door; my mother-in-law was standing there with a laundry basket holding enough food for the whole Shabbos.

My in-laws still wanted me; they didn't want to get rid of me, and would do whatever they could to help. That was really awesome. Mental illness is something you can't handle alone; it's such an isolating feeling as it is.

My 11-year-old son also suffers from bipolar disorder. He's on medication, but he's still had some pretty dangerous and violent episodes that were directed at me. One time he threw something at my head and I needed stitches. I was actually in the emergency room a couple of times. He couldn't regulate his emotions. Eventually we got him into an outpatient hospital program for three weeks.

I'm also getting him into different therapies that work for him. While he was in the hospital he really loved pet therapy, so I found a pet therapy group that meets once a month through the local library. He also has very poor social skills, so he's going to be participating in a social skills group this summer to help him manage his anger. He's doing a lot better. All of his teachers have said that

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they noticed a difference.

I have overcome a lot to get where I am today. I am happily married and the mother of two beautiful children. I have a master's degree and am employed full-time in corporate America. Sharing my story has become my passion. I want to help end the stigma of mental illness and enable others to understand what it is. It's an illness that affects the mind, just as cancer affects the body. It is crucial to end the feeling that there's something shameful about it, so that individuals who are suffering can get the help they need without worrying about what others will think.

Mental illness isn't a death sentence; there is hope. I want to bring that hope to others.

SUPPORT FOR OTHERS

It was with this goal in mind that I founded Chazkeinu, along with several other women. Chazkeinu is an organization that offers free weekly conference calls for Jewish women with mental illness, or those who are dealing with the mental illness of a family member. Our goal is to provide *chizzuk* to everyone who is touched by mental illness with empathetic, genuine support while creating positive connections. We help people feel safe, understood and uplifted amidst their struggles.

I didn't really want to go public with my story, but Chazkeinu basically found me, not the other way around. Last January, a girl who lives in the Midwest happened to go to a lecture given by someone who *darvens* in my *shul*, a rabbi who is also a psychologist. I had mentioned to him that phone support was something I'd be interested in doing, and he gave her my contact information. She had a relative who was also interested, and then she found a fourth person online. That first official phone call had 12 women on the line. On a typical call, we now we have over 50 participants who either have a mental health issue or are dealing with the mental health issue of a loved one. We are not very particular about age or religious level. The oldest participant is—well, we didn't ask her her age, but she once said that she'd had the illness for 50 years. A typical Chazkeinu call consists of one speaker sharing her personal story for around 20 minutes, followed by "shares," other callers responding and offering their feedback and comments. There's a lot of protection of privacy. People can be as open or as anonymous as they want. I've told my own story, and also shared what it's like to be a family member of someone with a mental illness.

If there aren't too many people sharing, the person who's moderating, which is usually me or one of the other cofounders, reads something aloud she has prepared for just such a contingency,

usually something from one of Rabbi Dr. Abraham Twerski's books or a thought on the *parshah*.

Once a month, we have mental health professionals offering general guidance and encouragement. We've had a lot of really amazing speakers, including a *frum* nurse who worked in an inpatient psych unit. Dr. David Pelcovitz came on the line, which was so exciting. The speech is recorded (if the speaker agrees), so if people miss the call or want to hear it again they can. The personal shares are not recorded.

We've had about 28 phone conferences so far, starting last March. We once had a girl from England get on the conference call when it was a.m. in her time zone because she'd read about it somewhere and wanted to participate. To make it more convenient for those in other countries, we've initiated a second weekly session on Wednesday afternoons so women can call in internationally.

Chazkeinu also has a partner program in which we pair up two people with similar challenges, whether they're single women or parents of people with mental illness, and they get together during the week to talk or just to check in. I love that program. One of my partners is in England and one is in Canada. There's nothing like peer support. It says to us, "You're not in this alone. There are other people going through the same thing."

Chazkeinu gets publicity mostly through social media, emails and word of mouth. Officially, we are a project of Shabbat.com under the auspices of Rabbi Benzion Klatzko. He dedicated some of his staff to create a beautiful website for us: www.chazkeinu.org. We hope to expand to include a monthly e-newsletter, and eventually have a retreat for members so we can meet each other in person. Our organization is young, but we have already seen much success. Doing this is my dream come true. I am so happy that other people won't have to suffer the way I did. Just being reassured that they're not alone is invaluable. The name *Chazkeinu* comes from the word for "strength." We strengthen ourselves by strengthening each other. That's our motto.

My family has requested that I remain anonymous and use a pseudonym for this article. The stigma of mental illness is not limited to our community but exists in the outside world as well, such as in the job market and other places. In private I'm very open about my condition, but I understand the danger. That's the whole point of Chazkeinu. Mental illness isn't talked about, and we want people not to be afraid of it. □

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