



UNVEILED

LIFE WITH MENTAL ILLNESS #5

During the time I was behaving in a completely uninhibited way, I had to be supervised constantly. Although this was my experience, not everyone who experiences a manic episode has such a severe reaction. Upon Dr. Bunzel's instruction, someone had to be with me 24/7. I was to stay home as much as possible. The medication I was taking was to help sedate me from the manic state, and as it kicked in I felt like a "walking zombie." I was living in the world but it was as if I was in a deep sleep at the same time.

Eleven days after my baby's birth, even after I started taking medication, I was still battling with agitation, some of the mania, and a host of other difficult emotions.

Because I was on medication, I had to stop nursing, which was a point of contention for me. However, although I was no longer the exclusive caretaker of my baby, I still felt that I needed to be in control of something. So, for example, when I once saw my husband feeding the baby before the 3-hour mark, I wanted to grab the baby away. I was totally uninhibited, acting on my emotions, without any restriction. When things would get overwhelming, my neighbor would come to take me out for a little while.

Although my mania decreased, my agitation still lingered on full force, and depression started kicking in. At that point, I started feeling the shame of how I was acting. When I remembered everything I had said or done in the presence of other people, I would think, "I can't see this person ever again."

Two months after my baby was born, we went to spend our *bein hazemanim* summer vacation back in our hometown. This would be our opportunity to show off our new baby and spend quality time with family and friends. When we arrived there, however, I felt so ashamed to face anyone I had been in contact with when I was manic. Whether I liked it or not, my secret was out, and I felt that everyone who saw me thought differently of me. In my mind it was as if I was holding up a sign that

said, "I have bipolar. Talk to me at your own risk."

Despite having an understanding that certain things I was doing were not sensible, there were parts of me that still hadn't returned to normal. Soon after I started taking medication, I decided I wanted to get a degree, a decision I made with my manic energy. In my application to the post-seminary program, I wrote freely of how incredible I am. By the time the program actually started, the depression came in full force. My words no longer came out naturally and with confidence. Interacting with my fellow classmates five years younger than me was not easy and not as enjoyable as when I was the "exciting" manic Zahava. It was very challenging for me to get up and get out when I had lost my desire to do anything and taking care of myself was the last thing I had on my to do list. After four months in the program, I checked out.

While medication gave me my control back so that I was able to be in the mindset to receive help towards my inner healing, it was not my cure. Rather, the intensive therapy I went to, where I did a lot of work with my inner child, turned out to be the healing experience I had been craving for so many years. Combined with the medication I was taking, I started crawling out of my difficult state. But my journey wasn't yet over. 

In Hindsight

Before and after giving birth, I was obsessed with the desire to nurse my baby. I took classes beforehand and prepared myself for the experience as much as possible. When I got to the hospital, I made sure I'd have a lactation consultant at my side to guide me immediately after birth.

I worked hard to make it work, but once it was going well, I had to stop cold turkey due to the medication. While I was devastated at the time, I later realized that just because a mother can't nurse her child doesn't mean she can't connect to her baby.

When medication is necessary, health is the first priority. I remember my friend asking me, "Do you want to be a good mother or do you want to nurse your baby?" Being a healthy mother takes precedence over everything else. Bonding can—and did—happen in many other ways.

To be continued...

Zahava List is the founder and director of Chazkeinu, a peer-led support organization for Jewish women who struggle with mental illness and their female family members.