

UNVEILED

LIFE WITH MENTAL ILLNESS #6

For three months, I attended classes toward attaining my degree. But when I realized that I wasn't benefitting from the program, I chose not to continue with the next semester.

The week after I stopped attending classes, I started feeling different again. I was still on medication and seeing a therapist, but suddenly the mania returned, climbing steadily with the hour. Before I knew it, I became obsessed with Mashiach, calling every rabbi I knew and asking him if he was the one. It was amazing how they all played along. I even phoned one very prominent rabbi and asked him. At the same time that I was high on the thought that I was finding Mashiach, I also experienced lows, telling myself that perhaps I had completed my *takkid*. Most of my manic and depressive episodes revolved around finding my purpose in this world.

Incredibly, I thoroughly enjoyed the lack of inhibition psychosis allowed me. In my former life, I was rather shy and apprehensive of initiating interaction with others. Suddenly, I was transformed into the life of the party. Wherever I went, I had no issue striking up conversations with people, asking them personal questions, and just feeling completely uninhibited.

While being manic was exciting for the time being, once I was put on the highest dosage of anti-psychotic medication and I started to return to a healthier state, reality hit me hard. Perhaps the most profound impact that this relapse had on me was the realization that bipolar disorder was an illness. It wasn't just a postpartum effect, as it had seemed to be the first time. This relapse confirmed that bipolar was something I would be living with for the rest of my life. And that hit me hard.

With this realization, the reality began to sink in: I will never be like everyone else. For me, especially living in an extremely homogenous community, where all the apartments looked alike, most women were raising large families, and most men were learning in *kollel*, the awareness that I would never be "one of them" was deeply painful. It appeared that everyone had it together but me.

While I was recovering from my first manic episode, my constant goal was, "When will I be healthy enough to have another baby?" But when I had my relapse, I realized that I was back to square one. Being normal, which was so important to me, became more elusive than ever.

In Hindsight

Of course, it's beautiful for a woman to want to have a large family, but what I soon learned in my journey toward healing was that the goal was not to be "normal," rather to be my best self. Yes, there were things I did in my psychotic state that were not appropriate, but they aren't things I'm ashamed of. To be ashamed of deeds I did when I wasn't in control of myself would be misplaced shame. I was simply uninhibited and lacking judgment because of my illness.

Once I came back to myself after my manic episodes, I realized how much I could offer to the world particularly because of my unique experiences. If I would conform to what everyone else is doing, thus hiding in shame regarding the life path Hashem has put me on, I wouldn't have the opportunity to do what I'm doing today. Simply by telling my story I could give women *chizuk*. Only because I appreciate the life Hashem gave me, I am able to give other women with mental illness the encouragement they need to be their best selves.♡

To be continued...

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