Being Bipolar

BY **NABIHA** MEHER SHAIKH

MOST **MENTAL ILLNESSES** IN OUR SOCIETY GO UNDETECTED AND UNTREATED DUE TO **TABOOS** ATTACHED TO **SEEKING PROFESSIONAL HELP.** NABIHA MEHER SHAIKH PROVIDES AN INSIGHT INTO BIPOLAR DISORDER BY SHARING HER OWN EXPERIENCE WITH **BATTLING** THIS DISABLING MENTAL DISEASE.

ILLUSTRATION BY SARA KHAN

GROWING UP, I aspired to be rich, successful and famous. I dreamt of becoming a human rights lawyer who would fight all wrongs against humanity and be lauded for it. I also wanted to be a famous novelist, rich enough to own her own island. Like all children of rich, ambitious parents, I equated financial success with happiness. As an adult, I realised how wrong I was. Currently, I'm not working myself into the ground and as a result, am always blissfully broke. Money comes in, money goes out, but slowly it'll start to trickle in more. Instead of freaking out about not being able to have any savings at the moment, I remind myself daily how grateful I am that I'm happy. And that's what matters, that's what counts.

At the age of 24, I started to take my mental health issues very seriously. I was always a troubled person so when my doctor confirmed that years of depression were a misdiagnosis and that I was really bipolar, it all started to make sense. Weird, too intelligent for my own good with an imagination that had a life of its own, I was always living on two planets at once: this world, where I physically belonged but didn't love, and my own little planet in my head. I hated this vicious, cruel world and aspired to change it. I didn't belong but I desperately wanted to. I hated this world so much that the thought of it ending never upset me. The thought of dying and leaving seemed appealing at times. I've kept some of the suicide notes I've written over the years to remind myself that even when I've hit rock bottom, I've managed to pull myself up again. They disturb me but they also comfort me and remind me that I'm a survivor and that is something to be proud of.

But I wouldn't be here, writing this, and sharing my story had it not been for some major life changes and many years of painful therapy. Had I not changed my life, had I not made the effort to overhaul a major part of who I am and taken all the medications, I am convinced I would be dead. I do not expect you to understand or even comprehend what it is that I go through, but I'm hoping some insight into my condition will help you develop a sense of empathy towards those of us with invisible disabilities.

At the time I was being diagnosed and tested for bipolar disorder, I was also working at a bank and was downright miserable. I was only working there to please my family, with whom I had a strained relationship. I desperately wanted my parents to be as proud of me as they were of their "normal" children. So, even though I was miserable, crying myself to sleep every night and

waking up with a sense of dread, I continued. I hated my job and had extreme ethical issues with much of what I was being asked to do and put up with. Other than work politics - which I later realised was nothing compared to the education industry - being placed in service and treated like an object was dehumanising and made me incredibly angry. Day after day, customers got away with abusing me when they were in a bad mood. Aunties got away with grilling me about my love life and marriage plans. Men stood at my desk and stared at me like a sex object. No matter what I wore, no matter how conservative my clothes, I was ogled, glared at, asked out and felt more like a sex worker than a banker. There was nothing I could do. Whenever I attempted to complain or told my misogynist boss that I wasn't happy, he told me to suck it up because the customer is always right. I didn't like him and as a result, when I did something good and was praised for it - it didn't feel good. It just felt empty.

In order to cope, I started self medicating with alcohol and partied hard to relieve stress that had accumulated over the week. Needless to say, I did incredibly stupid things that I later regretted and had no control over my impulsive need to drink when in the company of drinkers. I only gave up when given a choice: alcohol or mental health. The medication I was taking wouldn't work if I continued to drink - so reluctantly and grudgingly, I stopped. Luckily, that helped control my impulse so I was easily able to say no. I instantly started to feel better. My unquiet mind, with its constantly racing, and distressing thoughts, was at peace. I was able to sleep. The ticks in my head didn't keep me up and the silence allowed me to focus. It was probably the best decision I ever made even though it lost me many friends.

WHEN I STOPPED DRINKING and decided I would sort my issues out, I realised what a toxic circle of friends and relatives I had around me. Instead of being supportive, many judged me for not drinking and partying excessively like they would. Indeed, they only wanted validation and my refusal to give it to them strained our relationships. Many would get drunk and abuse me, killing off the tiny bit of self-esteem I had built up. They never apologised and eventually, instead of forgiving them for it over and over again, I simply cut them out and decided I didn't need such people in my life. If people who claim they are friends choose not to support you and deliberately aggravate you, there is either something wrong with them, or they simply are not worth investing in emotionally.

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At the same time, I made a major career change. I started teaching - something I never thought I'd do. I had a degree in Women's Studies and didn't think teaching would be a career choice that made me happy. Yet it did. Even though I never liked the environment or the politics, I loved teaching. It was immensely rewarding and made me feel good. It also allowed me to be creative and forced me to remain open-minded. Through teaching, I could change the world like I had always wanted to. It also inspired me to start blogging and writing on a regular basis.

Because of teaching, blogging and activism, I also met many wonderful people who I am now proud to call friends. The elite bubble I had earlier associated with slipped away into oblivion and there is no going back. There's no going back to a culture that I find toxic. Most of the elite I know have a sense of entitlement that makes them supremely unsympathetic to the horrific world around them. I have heard them make statements so callous that they have left me wounded. They judge me based on how much money I'm making and most have told me, to my face, that teaching is noble but not enough. They cannot comprehend that the pursuit of money is not something everyone aspires to and they judge those who don't. They don't understand any perspective other than their own, and as a result, I find the culture toxic and intolerant.

Another form of support in my life other than my doctors and family are many other bipolar people around me. I've been active on bipolar forums and support groups for many years now and they have served as an incredible form of strength. Therapy, along with medication, is crucial for recovery but doctors can't always be available, nor is it feasible to rely on just one doctor alone. Support groups are a form of group therapy and we provide each other with a lot of motivation. We keep each other going through the hard days and we provide support, without judgement, because we can truly understand unlike those who have never experienced severe mood shifts.

I teach critical thinking and believe in constant self-reflection which most people in this country resist. We don't admit our wrongs. Instead we point fingers and blame others. I honestly feel we suffer from a collective psychosis and if you have mental health issues, this attitude is dangerous. It is dangerous because the process of recovery and learning to cope in this world necessarily requires self-reflection and being forced to confront your mistakes. Unless you can do that, you cannot get better. It's easy to convince ourselves that we aren't the problem. I know - I've been there. But that state of mind, when one is nothing but just a victim, is counterproductive and doesn't lead to any healing. Instead it only leads to pain, bitterness and anger.

I turn a blind eye to those who judge me for who I am. Years of teaching, writing and part time activism have made me a thick-skinned and strong woman who knows her strengths. I've also made the effort to study my illness, to understand it, to do what I need to in order to stay functional and happy by avoiding triggers. I decline late nights, no matter what, because unlike others, I need a full eight hours of sleep. Those who love me truly understand and do not mind my absence. Without restful sleep, my day is ruined and there's a danger I will have an episode.

THESE DAYS I ONLY WORK PART TIME. I no longer associate with any schools and quite easily gave up a very prestigious teaching position because it was making me miserable. I now work when I can and don't when I can't; I do not have to medicate myself into a stupor just to function. I've learnt to value and crave stability over financial gain or societal approval. It honestly doesn't mean much without happiness. Sadly, I still see so many bipolar people stuck in a vicious trap, miserable and in immense pain. As a success story, I'm hoping this inspires them to become proactive and take their life into their own hands. If I can do it, anyone can. ◘