

Stigma, Meet Hope

Katherine Ponte

As a patient thriving with severe bipolar I disorder, it can be a long, hard road to recovery. And recovery is not a cure. Recovery in mental illness is living a full and meaningful life.

The journey starts with hope. It can be very hard to find or regain it. Stigma often blocks the way.

But courage and strength can clear the way. With a whole lot of hope, love, and support, recovery is possible, but only if you dare to dream it. The example of others can help show you the way.

This is where it started for me.

It started by suspecting, feeling that something was not right, but dismissing it, hoping it would pass. The stresses of social injustice, a sexual assault by a friend and classmate, academic stress, career issues, family illness, disappointments to myself and my family. Finally, a shocking diagnosis reached in just a few minutes. I didn't even know what bipolar was. Nobody took the time to explain it to me. Nobody cared about all of my triggers. They just gave me a label and some meds. Threats of forced medical leave. I was marginalized, isolated, and withdrawn. I felt so alone, far from home on that big campus. All of that hard work to get here, to get to Wharton, the University of Pennsylvania, all of my dreams, now I'm on the verge of losing it all. And so much blind angry denial.

Many years pass. Another crisis erupts. 911. The NYPD in my living room. Treatment, more denial that I was ever sick at all, refusal of any help, medical noncompliance. My doctor tells me things will only get worse. She's unbelievably patronizing. Forget my prior goals and ambitions. I dreaded my appointments. She says to me you are bipolar roman numeral number 1—I've lost my identity, I'm a disorder, a statistical abnormality. My self-esteem is utterly crushed. But wasn't she supposed to help me get better? Confusion about who or what's to blame. Who can I trust? A whole lot of heartache for me, for those that I love.

This disease is devastating and cruel, at its worst it takes lives. It assaults my mind when I'm manic. I believe I'm a prophet, I make religious shrines, I trash my apartment, I run all over the streets of NYC recklessly, I break into a house of worship to pray, an arrest, a criminal record, my moral superiority wreaks havoc. I buy a house sight unseen. I brought a homeless man home for tea.

At my peak, I experience a massive manic episode in the heart of NYC, at one of the city's most popular tourist destinations—John Lennon's Imagine Mosaic in Central

Park. I imagine a world without me or anyone else in it, the end. God made me the messenger. Why can't others see it too? I was trying to save the world, while others laughed and took pictures of me. Sirens sound. This is it. My husband explains that I'm sick. The ambulance picks me up just steps away. The EMS wraps me in a sheet from head to toe to contain me, to hide me. They say I'm a wild one. My husband was shocked each and every time. How could I be so reckless, oblivious to the dangers, so completely and totally mad out of my mind? But, it all made sense to me at the time.

Delusional, psychotic, floridly manic is how they described it. 1, Relapse, then 2, 3 and 4, many close calls. Locked up 1, 2, and 3 times in the psych ward, it feels like a jail, you can't come and go, no sunlight, no fresh breezes, the guards, solitary confinement, you're comatose. The physical and chemical restraints make clear—you're locked up.

When will the relapses end? This is bipolar in all of its glory. How can I live with this? I was mortified by all that I had done. How could anyone possibly forgive me?

I withdraw further and further. Isolation deeply seeps in, takes hold, was my existence. Barely existing, hardly surviving, wishing I could just end it all like so many like me have done so before, but no I don't want that at all—I just want the pain and suffering to stop, I want to be me, the me before bipolar struck, I want my life back, a life. I just can't stop crying. Marital strain. Can I ever have kids? What kind of manic mother would I be? I threw it all away, it took away my dreams.

Unemployment. Dependency. People now expect far less of me and some nothing at all, now that I'm just mentally ill. I am a lawyer, I went to an Ivy league for this? I expected so much more. I never thought I would end up settling for so much less. What a big fall. Oh, the burden, the guilt.

This treatment, that treatment. This med, that med. Zyprexa. Obesity. Seroquel. Sedation. Lithium diseased my parathyroids. The side effects make it hard to stay on the meds. Now everyone just thinks I'm lazy, see how fat I've become. They minimize my pain and suffering, dishearten, discourage me when they say can't you just get better, cheer up. Am I to blame? Am I trying hard enough? Do they really think I like being this way? Poked and prodded. Nothing seems to work. Will anything ever work? Why bother?

Maybe, I'm just unlucky in life. How could this happen to me, how did it get so bad? Why God? Why me? All hope is lost. All that remains is pain and suffering. I hate my life, I hate myself. Self-stigma—the most powerful, most dangerous stigma of all. You are your condition. Shame and embarrassment. This is the rest of your life. Nothing suggests otherwise. That's why I wanted to end it all.

And others. I can't let them see me this way. I'd rather not see them at all. My mother keeps insisting, persisting. She won't leave me alone. My spouse never lets up. They always fear the worst now, rarely the better. I've got everyone on high alert 24/7. I avoid them and hide my symptoms as best as I can. If they really know how I'm feeling, that I'm struggling it will only mean more trouble for me, back to the psych ward. And why cause worry and all of that pity and sorrow?

How can anyone possibly like me anyway? Maybe before, but not now, never again. I'm completely alone—alone even from myself.

It just keeps getting worse with no end in sight, but all of a sudden, out of the blue it starts to get just a little bit better. I see someone who's done it. Who's taken back their life, others fighting their way through it. I think maybe ... maybe I can too. Stigma has kept me in exile for far too long. I've had enough. When hope finally returns, it takes stigma down.

I start to get back up on my feet. 1 step, 2 steps, 3 steps forward, 2 steps backwards, forward again. And so on. It's a slow journey. But it is doable. Despite what many may say, many may think, mental illness is not a terminal illness.

I self-empower, I love myself, I take care of myself, most importantly I believe in myself, I believe I deserve so much more, I believe I can, and I will get better. Others have done so and so can I.

Adding to that, more positive examples and a whole lot of love and support—a caring and loving family, great medical care all lifting my hope. I reach stability but that was not enough. I had to reach recovery to have a full and meaningful life. I reach it. I'm in recovery. I've arrived to where I hope will be the rest of my life. It's a truly wonderful to be alive again—a family, a career, happiness. I am eager to show people the new me, to tell them, "I know what you thought about me, because I thought it too, but look at me now." I tell anyone, and everyone who will listen to me that everything stigma said about me was just one big lie. I stand up to stigma by creating ForLikeMinds.com to help others like me overcome stigma to reach recovery. By allowing us to connect with each other, we can support and inform each other so we can pursue recovery together.

I return to the Imagine Mosaic nearly every day. Now, I imagine, I see a world with me in it, happiness.

That's what happened to me when stigma, met hope. Because hope can conquer stigma. Recovery is real.

Katherine Ponte is a mental health advocate and entrepreneur. She is the founder of ForLikeMinds, the first online peer-based support community dedicated to people living with or supporting someone with mental illness and is in recovery from bipolar I disorder. She is on the NAMI New York City Board of Directors.