

Reflecting on an Illness

Mary Seymour reflects on her experience with bipolar disorder, which is sometimes called manic depression.

Call Me Crazy, But I Have to Be Myself

The writer labels herself “mentally ill.”

An example illustrates the extent of the illness.

More examples show the difficulties the writer faces.

Each sentence begins with a similar phrase that reveals the writer’s feelings.

Nearly every day, without thinking, I say things like “So-and-so is driving me crazy” or “That’s nuts!” Sometimes I catch myself and realize that I’m not being sensitive toward people with mental illness. Then I remember I’m one of the mentally ill. If I can’t throw those words around, who can?

Being a functional member of society and having a mental disorder is an intricate balancing act. Every morning I send my son to junior high school, put on professional garb, and drive off to my job as alumni-magazine editor at a prep school, where I’ve worked for six years. Only a few people at work know I’m manic-depressive, or bipolar, as it’s sometimes called.

Sometimes I’m not sure myself what I am. I blend in easily with “normal” people. You’d never know that seven years ago, fueled by the stress of a failing marriage and fanned by the genetic inheritance of a manic-depressive grandfather, I had a psychotic break. To look at me, you’d never guess I once ran naked through my yard or shuffled down the hallways of a psychiatric ward. To hear me, you’d never guess God channeled messages to me through my computer. After my breakdown at 36, I was diagnosed as bipolar, a condition marked by moods that swing between elation and despair.

It took a second, less-severe psychotic episode in 1997, followed by a period of deep depression, to convince me I truly was bipolar. Admitting I had a disorder that I’d have to manage for life was the hardest thing I’ve ever done. Since then, a combination of therapy, visits to a psychiatrist, medication, and inner calibration have helped me find an even keel. Now I manage my moods with the vigilance of a mother hen, nudging them back to center whenever they wander too far. Eating wisely, sleeping well, and exercising regularly keep me balanced from day to day. Ironically, my disorder has taught me to be healthier and happier than I was before.

Most of the time, I feel lucky to blend in with the crowd. Things that most people grumble about—paying bills, maintaining a car, working 9 to 5—strike me as incredible privileges. I’ll never forget gazing through the barred windows of the psychiatric ward into the parking lot, watching people come and go effortlessly, wondering if I’d ever be like them again. There’s nothing like a stint in a locked ward to make one grateful for the freedoms and burdens of full citizenship.

Yet sometimes I feel like an impostor. Sometimes I wish I could sit at the lunch table and talk about lithium and Celexa instead of *Will & Grace*. While everyone talks about her fitness routine, I want to brag how it took five orderlies to hold me

down and shoot me full of sedatives when I was admitted to the hospital, and how for a brief moment I knew the answers to every infinite mystery of the blazingly bright universe. I yearn for people to know me—the real me—in all my complexity, but I'm afraid it would scare the bejesus out of them.

An extended example illustrates the point.

Every now and then, I feel like I'm truly being myself. Like the time the school chaplain, in whom I'd confided my past, asked me to help counsel a severely bipolar student. This young woman had tried to commit suicide, had been hospitalized many times, and sometimes locked herself in her dorm room to keep the "voices" from overwhelming her. I walked and talked with her, sharing stories about medication and psychosis. I hoped to show by example that manic-depression did not necessarily mean a diminished life. At commencement, I watched her proudly accept her diploma; despite ongoing struggles with her illness, she's continuing her education.

I'm able to be fully myself with my closest friends, all of whom have similar schisms between private and public selves. We didn't set out to befriend each other—we just all speak the same language, of hardship and spiritual discovery and psychological awareness.

The final line echoes the title.

What I yearn for most is to integrate both sides of myself. I want to be part of the normal world but I also want to own my identity as bipolar. I want people to know what I've been through so I can help those traveling a similar path. Fear has kept me from telling my story: fear of being stigmatized, of making people uncomfortable, of being reduced to a label. But hiding the truth has become more uncomfortable than letting it out. It's time for me to own up to who I am, complicated psychiatric history and all. Call me crazy, but I think it's the right thing to do.

Reading for Better Writing

Working by yourself or with a group, answer these questions:

1. What purpose does Seymour identify for writing the essay? What other purposes might be served by publishing this piece for *Newsweek's* readers?
2. The writer starts with one category label for herself ("mentally ill") and then quickly adds another ("functional member of society"). How does the second label redefine the first?
3. Description is used to support many other kinds of writing, including the types of analytical and persuasive writing outlined here in *The College Writer*. In what other chapters could this essay have been included, and how do you know?
4. Review the "Editing and Proofreading" chapter of this book (pages 91–106), especially the portion on biased words. Why does Seymour use the phrase "call me crazy"? Is her use of the word biased or insulting? Explain.

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