

Coping With Bipolar Disorder

By Yohanna Abdullah

It's been six months since I was last warded at the Institute of Mental Health which means I have been free of mania and depression for half a year. It feels good to be normal again, though normalcy cannot be taken for granted. Every day that I passed by without a symptom of bipolar disorder is embraced thankfully with gratitude to the Al-Mighty, Most Gracious, Most Merciful.

I have been challenged with Bipolar Disorder for 14 years and it has been a journey of highs and lows just like a rollercoaster ride. The episodes have been so dramatic that I feel that my life history has been defined by them rather than the periods of wellness. The past year was the most difficult year whereby I was admitted for most of the 10 months period. Each time I was discharged as I was back in for being high again. It was most frustrating for me and my loved ones to have me behind locked doors and at times tied up in bed for being loud and aggressive.

What is meant by highs and lows? Bipolar disorder is a psychiatric condition whereby a person has mood swings between mania and depression. The old name for the condition is Manic Depression and it is a chronic mental health issue. As much as I wish my condition will be cured one day and disappear forever like a long-forgotten memory, I know it won't go away without specific steps taken. This starts with taking my medication religiously and getting good sleep and keeping stress levels down.

What is a high or a low like? I have my own ranking of my moods and keep a mood chart to capture daily my mood for the day. I rank my mood on a happiness scale ranging from 0 = Catatonically Depressed such as I cannot move or function, to 10 = Out of this world manic or in other words so ecstatically mad that I can strip naked in public. Initially when I got out of the hospital six months ago, my mood was low at a 3 or a 4 but it has been back to a normal mood which is a 5. If I

am a 6, I should start monitoring my mood and avoid escalating into a 7 or 8 then 9 and 10. I write my mood ratings on a calendar which I keep in the kitchen so that my family can monitor my moods too.

I am triggered by many things and one of them is happiness itself, I cannot afford to get too happy for my brain is prone to highs. I am Bipolar Type 1 while others are Type 2; Type 1 is prone to mania and Type 2 is prone to depression. So when I get good news and am happy I tell myself to be moderate for God loves moderation in everything.

Being on an excessively high mood or mania is like having an alter ego that will do and say things the normal me wouldn't. I am a modest person in general but when I am high, I am uninhibited and say or do as if there is no wrong or right. Whatever is right is what feels right at the moment of time. I also have hallucinations or false beliefs that the world is about to end any time soon. In my first episode I had stripped myself naked in my home and would have walked out had my ex-mother in law had not locked the gate. I did that because I thought being naked is the only way to get out magically from my prison house. She did not waste time in calling a *bomoh* or *dukun* to cure me of what she thought was a possession by genies who according to her inhabited my house in Johor. The healer came, a small old man but when he treated me by putting lime juice in my mouth what I saw instead was a huge dark-skinned giant wearing a huge stone ring who was choking me till I gave up protesting and let him kill me if he wanted to. When I did, the ritual ended and the old man asked me to take a floral bath.

My parents were living in Kuala Lumpur when this happened and they rushed back to see me and send me to the hospital and I was warded and diagnosed with Bipolar Disorder. They had consulted my family doctor and his recommendation was to send me to a psychiatric ward as traditional cures will not work.

There are many more episodes after the first one with it happening once or twice a year but last year was very bad I suspect because the medication was changed and I was not suited to it. Eventually the doctors changed back to good old fashioned medicines which are cheaper too. Plus now I have a monthly injection which will stay in my system for five weeks and is an additional defense in case I

defaulted with my medications. In the past I stick to my medications except when I am high then I reject it.

How would you know if your loved one is suffering from bipolar disorder? You can see by their abnormal behavior such as talking non-stop incoherently, singing loudly or dancing, talking to strangers, quarrelling and using abusive language, dressing differently or sexily, anything out of the ordinary which provokes people to say "Eh you are mad is it?" They are probably out of their right mind, in other words insane.

On the low extreme, the person is sad, quiet, retreating into herself, have suicidal thoughts and behavior, unable to work to summon energy to attend to daily responsibilities such as bathing, cooking, cleaning the house or taking care of the children and also taking care of the children. In both mania and depression both may suffer from insomnia.

If you have family members or friends who exhibit these symptoms please get psychiatric help immediately as these conditions can be alleviated through proper medication and treatment. Left untreated the worst that will happen is suicide.

I was caught once sitting at a jetty in East Coast Park contemplating I dare jump or not and some people called the police which was the start of many more encounters with the men and women in blue. I was angry with my family and I thought perhaps they would rather have me dead. As I sat at the edge of the jetty after climbing past the railing, I asked myself if I dare die by drowning. I concluded that I dare not as I had ever experienced drowning twice before and it was scary. Anyway thank goodness for concerned members of the public and the police who cared enough about saving lives.

After your loved one is diagnosed and treated it is important to ensure that they take their medicines everyday as recommended. Like any other diseases, you need medication to treat is obviously wrong with your brain. It is not like a normal brain and it cannot work normally. And medication can help even if you have to bear with some side effects. It may take some time tweaking your medicine which is best for you so you have to allow time and nature to take its course.

Apart from medicines, regular exercise and regular and sufficient sleep of optimally 8 hours a day helps. Sticking to routines also help promote brain health. For me, being more vigilant on festive occasions help to moderate my high mood on these days such as birthdays, anniversaries, New Year and other festivities also play an important part. Managing my workload so that I am stress-free and maintaining good relationships with your loved ones also help reduce stressors that can otherwise provoke you to having an episode.

After receiving a diagnosis from a psychiatrist and receiving medication, an important aspect of recovery is also getting into a support group that will help in your rehabilitation such as that provided by Club HEAL and Singapore Association of Mental Health (SAMH). Apart from being a part of your health routine, attending such sessions regularly will provide you with knowledge and most of all social support with others on the same boat and trained staff and dedicated volunteers who knows how to help you cope with your condition. Club HEAL also supports caregivers who are an important part of the equation in order to stay well. Such bodies will also support participants in their bid to return to return to part-time or full-time work. For me, the longest I have been in remission was for one and a half years after I participated in SAMH's Illness Management and Recovery programme. And now I am attending Club HEAL's programme that helps in my journey to recovery.

On a personal note, managing the illness is about your communication with God who has the power to heal you and who knows what is best for everybody. Don't forget to supplicate to Him to attain good health for every sickness there is a cure and you can manage your bipolar well if you follow the tried and tested steps for good health. There are many prayers that you can perform especially such as a *hajjat* prayer to cure your illness, anytime you are free. Reading the Quran is also therapeutic and helps heals all illnesses. The most important thing is to first accept that God has given you the illness as a test to your faith and have hope that you will be cured and empower yourself with knowledge to manage the illness and love yourself and love God who created you in the best of moulds. In your imperfections you find His Perfection.