

According to a report in Sunday's Age, those of us with bipolar disorder often experience amplified emotions, and consequently struggle in our inter-personal relations (Facing difficulties: why people with bipolar disorder don't always see how you feel, Sunday Age, 11th January). We can also appear self-absorbed, resistant to reason and don't seem to care how people around us feel.

These claims are attributed to Tamsyn Van Rheenen's recent doctoral research. Tamsyn explored why those of us with bipolar disorder have "problematic psychosocial functioning". She hypothesised that we don't get along with other people because we have difficulty interpreting facial emotions.

Tamsyn's research found that people with bipolar disorder are more likely to misinterpret facial expressions than those who don't have the illness. Not being able to accurately read a person's body language may cause misunderstandings. This explains why so many misunderstandings occur via text and emails. An emoticon is just not the same as a smile or a frown.

Tamsyn warns that the results of her study should be interpreted with caution. And indeed they should. Of the 50 people recruited to the experimental group, 33 people were experiencing symptoms of bipolar disorder. They were unwell.

When those of us with bipolar disorder are unwell, we experience significant changes in mood, thought, energy and behavior. Our behaviour can be hyperactive and expansive (manic), or it can be reclusive and sluggish (depressed). It is common for someone who is manic or depressed not to notice how anyone else feels. When we are unwell, we are completely self-absorbed and will not listen to reason.

However, bipolar disorder is an episodic illness. Most of us, most of the time, are well. My most recent episode of illness was in 1995, nearly 20 years ago. Of course I have my ups and downs. Who doesn't?

One of the flaws in mental health research is the tendency for researchers to use convenient samples. So called "mental health consumers" are recruited through mental health organisations, rehabilitation programs and consumer groups. Those of us who stay well are largely absent from this research. The research ignores many of us who are happy, enjoy family life, friends, work and are engaged with our local communities.

The bias towards the bleak side of bipolar disorder reinforces stereotypes about people with bipolar disorder. By grouping together those who are well and unwell under the same label 'People with bipolar disorder', we are all tarnished with the same brush. This increases stigma towards all of us who have bipolar disorder.

The former Premier of Victoria, Jeff Kennett, once suggested another politician, Mark Latham, “was displaying the symptoms of someone suffering bipolar”. Referring to a person as having bipolar disorder is a technique used to silence us. In his role as chairman of beyondblue, Mr Kennett should have known better than to use the stigma associated with this illness to discredit Mark Latham’s opinions.

Even though I have been well for a long time, I still face the stigma associated with bipolar disorder. Some people who are aware that I have bipolar disorder play the bipolar card to silence me. If I express myself passionately or argue strongly, they raise their eyebrows. If I disagree with them, they frown and turn away. And believe me, I notice their dismissive facial expressions.

When I hear that people with bipolar disorder have “problematic psychosocial functioning” and a poor quality of life, I feel angry. Like everybody, I have a normal range of emotions including feeling angry, sad, excited and disappointed. These everyday emotions can be misinterpreted because of people’s prejudices about bipolar disorder.

I have learnt to manage this chronic illness like a person with diabetes must learn to manage her sugar levels. My challenge has been to control the symptoms of bipolar disorder so that they do not interfere with my life, particularly my friendships. I have learnt how to stay well.

Dr Sarah Russell is the principal researcher of Research Matters. Her book *A lifelong journey: staying well with manic depression/bipolar disorder* (Michelle Anderson Publishing) is based on research funded by *beyondblue*