

You can have a mental illness and a life

Sarah Russell

Published: May 5, 2009 - 1:53AM

Statistics don't tell the whole story about living with manic depression.

Advertisement

WE HEAR so much about the depressing side of mental illness. Statistics focus on the high rates of suicide, homelessness, substance abuse, criminal behaviour, unemployment and divorce. Mental health professionals describe the burden of mental illness in terms of pain, suffering, disability and death.

According to the statistics, people with manic depression (also known as bipolar disorder) are four times more disabled than the general population. Research highlights social isolation, breakdown of relationships and failure of support networks. Statistics also show that one in five people with manic depression commit suicide, with the rest of us statistically destined to a life on disability pensions.

This bias towards reporting the dark side of manic depression is not surprising given that people who stay well are largely absent from mental health research. Researchers often use convenient samples — they recruit "mental health consumers" through mental health organisations, rehabilitation programs and consumer groups. As a result, this research ignores the many of us with manic depression who are happy, enjoy family life, friends, work and are engaged with our local communities.

Manic depression is often portrayed as a "nightmare" — and while this is true for some people, it is not my experience of the illness. What can be a nightmare is other people's response to the illness. Most people respond to physical illness with sympathy and compassion, often sending "get well soon" cards. Kind gestures and compassion rarely accompany episodes of mental illness.

To be with a person experiencing an episode of manic depression can be exhausting, even terrifying. During one episode of depression, I simply sat silently and stared. It was a catatonic, psychotic depression. I have no memory of this, but my friends and family certainly do.

But during an episode of mania I neither sat still nor quietly. The illness gave me the energy to clean the house, weed the garden and believe I could translate *War and Peace* and split the atom, all by 3am, leaving the rest of the day free to save the world. So much energy, so many new ideas. I ate, moved and talked with a sense of urgency and importance. My mind and mouth were in overdrive. My friends were left gasping in my wake.

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

Not surprisingly, the things that keep me well are the same things that help all people to stay well. We all benefit from eating healthy foods, exercising, avoiding too much stress, sleeping well, and so on.

However, with manic depression, I also need to make specific changes to my life to stay well. With kindness, support and trust of close friends, including my mother, I have developed my own "stay well plan". This helps me to control my illness so that symptoms — depression, psychosis, mania, anxiety — do not interfere with my day-to-

day life. I now accept that my mental illness is not a character flaw, personality trait or sign of personal weakness. It is an illness that can affect anyone, regardless of age, race, social class or sporting ability.

Although my stay-well plan includes medication, equally important are my work, friends, local community, laughter, dog walking, sunshine, tennis, dancing and sleep. I do not take these everyday things for granted — they have made an enormous difference to my ability to live well with manic depression.

My experience shows that people with manic depression do get well — and stay well. Statistics only tell one side of the story. If researchers look outside the mental health system, they will discover that there are many good news stories to tell.

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.

This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/federal-politics/you-can-have-a-mental-illness-and-a-life-20090504-ask.html>