

BI-POLAR GIRL

An Irreverent Look at
Bipolar Disorder

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BLACKMAN-SHEPPARD

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To my father



FOREWORD

We all have moods. We all have good days and bad days. We all have times when we feel unstoppable and we have times when we just want to stop and make it all go away. That's perfectly normal. After all, we are all just perfectly normal human beings, aren't we ...

But what happens when our 'ups' are just a little bit, well, too up? When we don't just feel unstoppable but we feel invincible and when nothing could ever bring us down? We can do what we want, eat what we want, spend what we want, work hard, play hard and tomorrow, we know for certain, will simply never come. In fact, we are so 'up', we haven't really noticed that we can't come down.

Until that day when we do. With a crash.

When that happens, we aren't just a bit down, we are seriously can't get out of bed, don't draw the curtains, make the world go away, I don't care if you are my partner or my parent or my child, just leave me alone and switch off the light very down indeed.

Highs and lows are normal. To experience the highest highs and the lowest lows means there is something more sinister going on in our brains. This is the realm of bipolar disorder.

This is what this book is all about.

BI-POLAR GIRL

For a long time referred to with the catch-all title of ‘manic depression’, bipolar disorder is becoming better understood these days but even so, like all mental illness, it is still the subject of a great deal of misunderstanding, confusion, fear, blame, and guilt. And, like all mental illness, there is a lot of it about. According to the UK’s Mental Health Foundation, ‘one in four people will experience some kind of mental health problem in the course of the year’¹ (with women more likely to be treated than men). In other words, if you don’t suffer from some form of mental illness, someone close to you probably will.

There are a number of ways to treat a condition such as bipolar disorder. Medication is one, with any number of drugs available but a lottery as to which one will work, how, when, and with what side effects. Diet and exercise play their part too. Alcohol is a depressant even though you start off by feeling good. Exercise helps us produce serotonin, the lack of which can lead to depression. There’s another treatment too that can not only help someone with the condition, it may also help to prevent it too. It’s called honesty.

In the remarkably frank and vivid portrayal of a woman whose life comes crashing down as a result of bipolar disorder, Gabrielle takes the reader on the mental roller coaster that is her illness and, if not the cure, the treatment that follows her diagnosis. And she does so with an honesty that is rarely found in a subject that is denied, hidden, maligned, and treated as a taboo (the World Health Organization quotes a public survey which revealed that most people put mental disorder down to stress or ‘lack of willpower’).²

Whether you read this book because you are coming to terms with your own illness or searching within it for a better understanding of the illness of a loved one, I know that Gabrielle’s honesty will be of support to you on your own roller-coaster journey. All we ask of you in return is that you

Foreword

too talk about the illness and your experiences with equal honesty and do your bit to help others in the way that we hope Gabrielle has helped you.

Ian Gilbert

Suffolk

10 October 2010 – World Mental Health Day

1 www.mentalhealthfoundation.org.uk

2 www.who.int/features/factfiles/mental_health

PREFACE

This little book was born out of my desire to encourage those poor souls who find themselves sitting in the waiting rooms of psychiatric clinics and hospitals.

Bi-Polar Girl is a personal story based on my real-life experience of living with bipolar disorder. It is not meant to be a recommendation for any particular treatment.

Bipolar disorder, also known as manic-depressive illness, is a brain disorder that causes unusual shifts in mood, energy, activity levels, and the ability to carry out day-to-day tasks. Symptoms of bipolar disorder are severe. They are different from the normal ups and downs that everyone goes through from time to time. Bipolar disorder symptoms can result in damaged relationships, poor job or school performance, and even suicide. But bipolar disorder can be treated, and people with this illness can lead full and productive lives.

Bi-Polar Girl eventually found her way back to a happy life, full of love, hope, and laughter.

May YOU find your way back to laughter and the life YOU want to live.

For more support visit my blog www.bi-polargirl.com



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It is impossible for me to acknowledge here all those kind souls who have helped me on my journey and who have encouraged me to write this little book.

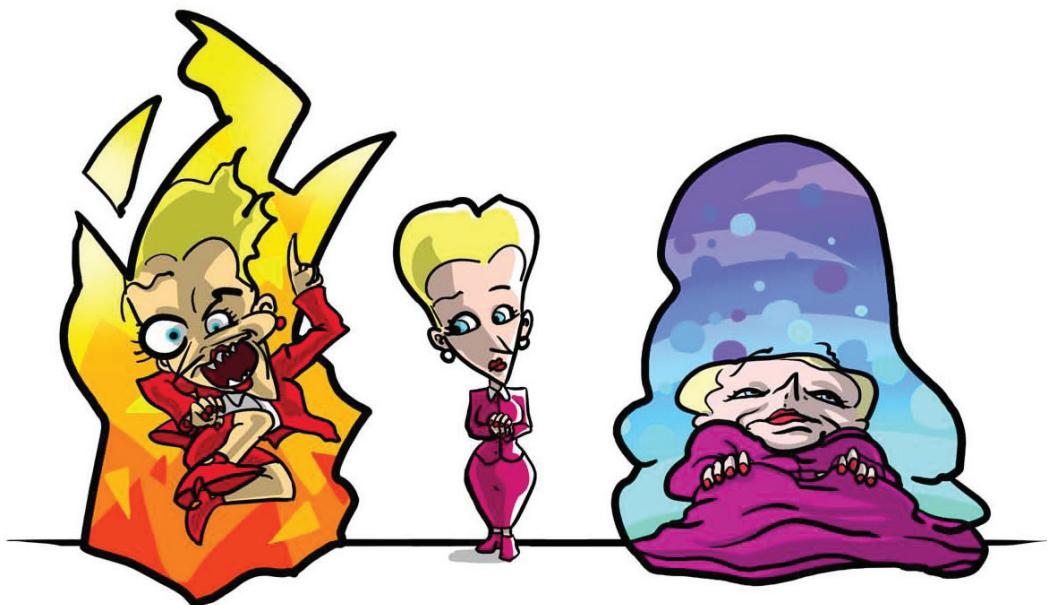
I thank you all from the bottom of my heart and I hope by now that you all know who you are!

I must however give special thanks to my son Greg for his wonderful illustrations without which Bi-Polar Girl would have a voice but no face. He knows bipolar disorder from his personal experience as well as from my own.

I must also thank my friend and coach Lynette Allen whose financial generosity and boundless belief in me has fed my confidence and kept my dream alive.

Last, but not least, a massive thank you to my editor Ian Gilbert for his generous understanding and patience.

To you all I am grateful.



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Chapter 1

GREETINGS

How it all Started

BI-POLAR GIRL

**What would help YOU feel less
scared right now?**

**What would help YOU feel there IS light
at the end of YOUR tunnel?**

Greetings



You are probably feeling very scared right now. I know I was.
You are also probably finding it impossible to believe you will ever get better. I know I did.

It helped me to have someone else understand what I was going through. It made a big difference for me to know that other people still believed in me when I no longer believed in myself.

I hope that following the ‘adventures’ of Bi-Polar Girl will help you feel less frightened and less lonely.

I have been where you are at this moment and I am right here with you.

BI-POLAR GIRL

What mental illness do YOU have:

Bipolar disorder I?

Bipolar disorder II?

Greetings



Hello! My name is Bi-Polar Girl.

I have bipolar disorder (BPD) II.

Maybe you have BPD II like me or maybe you have BPD I.

BPD I has high peaks (full manic episodes) and deep valleys (severe clinical depression).

BPD II has high wide plateaus (a hypo-manic state that lasts a long time) and deep wide canyons (severe and prolonged clinical depression).

Whichever way, you and I inhabit the same mental health territory.

BI-POLAR GIRL

When YOU look back at your past life:

What do YOU see?

What do YOU learn?

Greetings



Come with me. Together we will look back at what brought ME to where YOU are now.

My journey is also your journey.

Are you happy for me to be your companion for the rest of this little book?

Yes? Then follow me.

BI-POLAR GIRL

**What is it that tells YOU things
aren't quite right for YOU?**

Greetings



It all started one day when Bi-Polar Girl found that she could not get out of bed. Her body felt like concrete and she could not keep her eyes open.

Bi-Polar Girl thought, 'I must be very tired.' A week later and still stuck in her concrete body with her concrete-heavy eyelids, she thought, 'I feel so bad I wish I were dead.'

Something was not right ... She thought she had better go to the doctor's.

BI-POLAR GIRL

**What other health problems
have YOU discovered that were in fact
caused by clinical depression?**

We all have good days and bad days. We all have times when we feel unstoppable and times when we just want to stop and make it all go away. That's perfectly normal.

But what happens when our ‘ups’ are just a little bit too, well, up? When we don’t just feel unstoppable but we feel invincible? In fact we are so ‘up’, we haven’t really noticed that we can’t come down?

Until that day when we do. With a crash.

To experience the highest highs and lowest lows means there is something more sinister going on in our brains. This is the realm of bipolar disorder. This is what this book is about.

Gabrielle Blackman-Sheppard lives with Bipolar and whether you read this book because you are coming to terms with your own illness or searching within it for a better understanding of the illness of a loved one, Gabrielle’s honesty will be of support to you during your journey.

Gabrielle eventually found her way back to a happy life, full of love, hope and laughter. May YOU find your way back to laughter and the life YOU want to live.

“A very accurate and unflinching look at bipolar, whilst always remaining light-hearted - no easy task given the subject matter. I would happily recommend this to anyone who might want to know more about bipolar.”

Daisy Jellicoe, Membership Services, MDF The BiPolar Organisation

Bi-Polar Girl bubbles with a feel-good factor, but is still packed with a no-nonsense understanding of its roots and the journey that can be taken back to happiness. This is a ground-breaking approach for all who might feel they are lost in the darkness. It sheds light and brightness. And, ultimately, hope.”

Colin Northway, author and journalist with a special interest in medical studies

“I would recommend this book as a useful addition to a library to be read by patients, carers and professionals.”

Andrew Leahy, FRCPsych



Gabrielle Blackman-Sheppard works as a consultant, executive coach and life coach with particular expertise in intercultural communication and organisational as well as personal effectiveness. www.bi-polargirl.com

Greg Blackman is a published illustrator working in graphic novels, book covers, story boarding and character design.



Edited by **Ian Gilbert**, founder of Independent Thinking Ltd as part of the Independent Thinking Wellness series www.independentthinking.co.uk

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