

# **Surviving and Thriving With Bipolar Disorder**

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*A Family Guide to Living Well With a Mental Illness*

**Oshun Reed**

**Surviving and Thriving Will Bipolar Disorder: A Family Guide to  
Living Well With a Mental Illness**

**by Oshun Reed**

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# **Trigger Warning**

This book contains discussions of sex and suicidal ideation.

# Introduction

Living with bipolar disorder, or any mental illness, can feel like a daunting experience. The diagnosis itself might have come as a shock, perhaps even a relief, finally giving a name to the chaos you've been going through. However, with that label comes an avalanche of questions, fears, and uncertainties. How do you handle the unpredictable mood swings, the highs that send you soaring, and the lows that make getting out of bed seem impossible? How do you explain what you're going through to your loved ones, to your friends, or even to yourself?

This book is designed to guide you through that experience. Whether you're someone who has been recently diagnosed with bipolar disorder, a person who has been living with it for years, or someone who loves or works with someone who does, this book is for you. It's about establishing stability, embracing wellness, and learning how to thrive despite the difficulties that are associated with bipolar disorder. It's about demystifying the condition and offering practical, real-world advice from someone who has lived it and walked this path, not only personally but also alongside family members who have been confronted by the same struggles.

I understand this journey all too well, which is why I decided to write this book. Diagnosed with bipolar disorder in 2016 after the traumatic experience of being scammed out of \$122,000 by an online dating fraudster, I faced the ebbs and flows of this condition firsthand. But my story doesn't start or end with my own diagnosis. Four of my five children were diagnosed with bipolar disorder in the years leading up to my own, making mental illness a profoundly personal and family-wide experience. My experiences haven't been easy, but with the support of my family and the mental health community, I found my way to stability. In 2022, I was diagnosed as being in bipolar remission, evidence of the hard work, support, and perseverance it takes to live well with this disorder.

My journey has also defined my professional life. As a practice manager in the mental health field, I have dedicated myself to helping others negotiate their way through their mental health issues. My work is propelled by a deep appreciation of what it takes to live with a bipolar condition, not only as an individual but also within the complex dynamics of a family. In 2024, my contributions were recognized when I received the Women in Community Life Award in the Disability Rights category, illustrating my commitment to advocacy and support for those living with mental illness.

This book is a companion to my memoir, *Love Me: A Memoir of Online Dating, Mental Illness, and Redemption*, which outlines my journey through the trials of online dating and the impact of mental illness on my life. While *Love Me* provides an intimate look at my narrative, *Surviving and Thriving With Bipolar Disorder* expands on those experiences, focusing on how family support has been crucial for

living well with a diagnosis of mental illness. It showcases how, even under the most difficult circumstances, the strength of family bonds and the right support system can make a significant difference in managing and thriving despite the challenges of bipolar disorder.

You may be struggling with feelings of isolation, thinking that no one understands what you're going through. Given that bipolar disorder is sometimes depicted in the media as something that takes control of a person's life and turns them into a danger to others or themselves, it might be considered fearsome. The stigma surrounding mental illness can feel like a heavy weight, preventing you from getting the care and assistance you require. Additionally, If you're the one on the outside, watching a loved one grapple with this illness, you may feel powerless and uncertain of how to support them without going too far or saying the wrong thing.

This book seeks to deal with those pain points by providing you with the knowledge and tools to regain control of your life. It's about building a life where your mental illness does not define you, where you are more than your diagnosis. Here, you'll come across stories of resilience, learning, and healing. As you've just read, my family and I have managed to find peace and stability despite all the formidable challenges of living with bipolar disorder. Through such narratives of miraculous cures or easy answers, you will be able to recognize that the fight against this condition is won through resilience and the continuous work of maintaining mental health.

By reading this book, you will start to appreciate that bipolar disorder, while challenging, is not the end of the road. It is possible to control the symptoms and live a happy, purposeful life. You can go out on this voyage with optimism and resolve, even if it won't be simple or without obstacles.

This book is meant to serve as a reminder that you are not alone if you have been diagnosed with bipolar disorder. There is a group of people who have been there before you, who have experienced similar difficulties, and who have overcome them. Advice on managing your symptoms, collaborating with your healthcare providers, and creating a support network that values and comprehends your needs will all be made available. You'll discover the value of self-care, how to spot mood swings early on, and how to take proactive measures to remain well.

This book can help you understand what your loved one with bipolar disorder is going through if you are their spouse, friend, or family member. It offers advice on how to be there for them in their hour of need, how to have tough conversations about their mental health, and how to help them without being overwhelmed in the process. You'll discover how to sustain your own mental health, strike a balance between compassion and boundaries, and cultivate relationships based on respect and understanding.

This guide will help anyone who works with people who have mental illness—whether they are educators, counselors, or medical professionals—to better understand what it's like to live with bipolar disorder. It will provide helpful advice on how to assist your

patients or clients to manage their symptoms and create a meaningful life for themselves.

The details and motivation you require to proceed are provided in the chapters that follow. This book will serve as your guide, whether you're adjusting to a new diagnosis, offering support to a loved one, or simply trying to learn more about this complicated illness. It will demonstrate to you that having bipolar disorder does not entail living in a state of perpetual instability. It is possible to achieve stability. It is possible to be happy. And you can not only survive but also grow if you have the correct resources and assistance. Looking ahead to Chapter 1, you will learn more about the reasons why I decided to write this book.

# Chapter 1: Why I Wrote This Book—My Personal Family History

*Family is not an important thing; it's everything.* –Michael J. Fox

When I first decided to write this book, it wasn't just a simple choice; it was something I felt compelled to do. My family's experience with bipolar disorder is deeply personal and highly complex, determining each facet of our lives, from how we relate to one another to the way we view the world. It has brought us together in unexpected ways, challenged our associations, and put our resilience to the test. But it has also taught us the power of support, understanding, and unconditional love.

In this chapter, you'll walk with me through the individual stories of my family's fight against bipolar disorder. From the moment my son Nash was diagnosed at just 16 years old to the eventual diagnosis of three of my other children, and eventually, my own diagnosis at 58, you'll see how this mental illness has woven its way through our lives. These are not only tales of struggle and pain but also of growth, healing, and the unbreakable bonds that bind us together as a family.

You'll learn how every diagnosis impacted our relationships—how it tested the parent-child connection, formed new challenges in sibling dynamics, and affected partnerships. But more than that, you'll observe how these experiences motivated me to write this book, to provide hope, guidance, and a reminder that even in the face of mental illness, a family can find its way to stability, happiness, and even joy. In telling you our story, I hope to show that no matter how dark the days may seem, there is always a path forward.

## **The Beginning: Nash's Diagnosis and the Family's First Encounter With Bipolar**

Our family's experience with bipolar disorder began on New Year's Eve in 1999, a night that forever changed our lives. My 15-year-old son, Nash, was admitted to a psychiatric hospital with acute psychosis. At that time, Nash was living with his father while I was stationed in a remote Aboriginal community in central Australia for work. The urgency of the situation prompted me to leave everything behind and fly back immediately to be by Nash's side.

The initial experience was disorienting and heart-wrenching. Nash, who had previously been an exemplary student with top grades and a keen athlete excelling in lacrosse and cricket, was suddenly thrust into a world of mental health crisis. His aspirations to become a physiotherapist, once a bright beacon for his future, seemed to slip further away with each passing day.

The process of diagnosing Nash's condition was fraught with uncertainty and frustration. It took six grueling months of trial and error with various medications before a bipolar diagnosis was finally confirmed. During this period, I witnessed my son's life unravel in ways I could hardly have imagined. The stark contrast between his former self—full of potential and enthusiasm—and his current state of mental turmoil was agonizingly painful.

Nash's initial symptoms were dramatic and alarming. In this manic phase, he exhibited grandiose delusions, believing he had the power to heal his fellow patients and even his own family. This manic exuberance was short-lived, rapidly giving way to a severe depressive episode characterized by profound sadness and suicidal ideation. Watching Nash oscillate between these extreme emotional states was hurtful.

The first treatment prescribed was lithium, which, unfortunately, led to unwanted side effects, including significant weight gain. By the time he turned 16, just two months after his hospitalization, Nash had become noticeably overweight and deeply disheartened. The medication failed to deliver the relief he desperately needed, leading his doctors to consider alternative treatments.

The road to stability was anything but straightforward. Even after his diagnosis, Nash continued to face numerous challenges. He experienced several more psychotic episodes, each requiring additional hospitalizations. During his second hospital stay, and after three weeks, electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) was recommended. ECT is often used when other treatments and medications are not working. My understanding of ECT was limited to its portrayal in popular media. However, ECT proved to be the only treatment that helped Nash turn the corner and start to be well again.

The impact of bipolar disorder on Nash's life was deep and far-reaching. His dreams of becoming a physiotherapist were derailed by the side effects of ECT, which significantly impaired his memory and concentration. When he graduated from secondary school, his ATAR score of 63 was a crushing blow. This score fell far short of his expectations and those of his family. Nash completed his final two years over three years. He did his best, but his symptoms and the medication he took made studying difficult for him. He cried the day he got his ATAR score, believing it was his fault. I hugged him and told him that his score did not reflect who he was and what he had gone through to finish and pass.

In 2008, Nash's life took a hopeful turn when he became engaged to his girlfriend Sienna, who was his first serious relationship since his diagnosis. Sienna and Nash had

known each other since secondary school, and their relationship provided him with stability and joy. However, just after their engagement, Nash suffered another severe psychotic episode. His hospitalization during this period lasted six weeks, a difficult time marked by the stress of managing his illness while also preparing for his future with Sienna.

Following his release from the hospital, Nash resumed his plumbing apprenticeship and began working with a plumbing company. Unfortunately, his work environment was far from supportive. His boss proved to be unkind and dismissive, which only compounded the stress Nash was under. This negative work environment further complicated Nash's efforts to maintain stability and cope with his condition.

Nash's final major psychotic episode occurred when his son Hamish was two years old. This episode required an extended hospital stay, during which doctors experimented with various medications and dosages before deciding on another course of ECT. The treatment provided some relief, but the process was exhausting and took a significant toll on both Nash and his family.

Despite these ongoing challenges, Nash's condition eventually stabilized. He has managed to build a fulfilling life marked by personal and professional achievements. He works full-time, and in 2010, he and Sienna purchased their own home, creating a stable and loving environment for their growing family. They now have three children, and Nash's resilience and determination have been pivotal in his journey toward stability.

Reflecting on Nash's story, it is clear that his battle with bipolar disorder has been one of immense difficulty and persistence. Despite the numerous setbacks and challenges, his journey from a high-achieving teenager to a stable adult is a testament to his strength and the relentless support of his loved ones. Nash's experience highlights the huge impact of bipolar disorder on an individual's life and the importance of resilience and support in navigating this complex and often devastating illness.

## **Camilla's Postnatal Bipolar: The Unexpected Onset of Mental Illness**

In December 2017, my daughter Camilla faced a life-altering challenge: her first major psychotic episode. This occurred just six months after she gave birth to her first child, Ellie. The onset of this episode was marked by severe paranoia, a symptom often associated with bipolar disorder, especially when it emerges during the postnatal period. This period, characterized by dramatic hormonal changes and persistent sleep deprivation, can act as a catalyst for the onset of bipolar symptoms in new mothers.

Camilla's initial experience with postnatal psychosis was both alarming and distressing. Her symptoms were intense and disorienting, leading to a swift decision to seek hospital care. During her three-day hospitalization, Camilla began a regimen of medication aimed at stabilizing her mood. This early intervention was essential, providing some immediate relief but also marking the beginning of an ongoing struggle with her mental health.

The challenges did not end with this first hospitalization. As Camilla continued to expand her family, the complexities of her condition became more evident. After the birth of her second child, she faced another severe episode of postnatal psychosis. This time, the emotional and physical toll was compounded by the demands of caring for a newborn and a toddler. The strain on Camilla and her family was immense, with her condition placing a significant burden on her relationships and daily life.

The birth of her third child brought further complications. Managing bipolar disorder while raising young children proved to be an incredibly difficult task. Camilla's mood swings became increasingly pronounced, leading to frequent conflicts and emotional strain within the family. Her interactions with her husband, Luke, and me were particularly affected. The unpredictability of her mood swings created a challenging environment, often resulting in emotional outbursts and a heightened sense of frustration.

In response to the ongoing struggles, Camilla and Luke made a pivotal decision. They chose not to have any more children—a decision that was both practical and emotionally necessary. Luke underwent a vasectomy, which alleviated some of the immediate pressures associated with family planning and reduced the risk of further postnatal episodes. This decision was a critical step in managing Camilla's condition and allowing her to focus on her mental health without the additional stress of potential future pregnancies.

Beyond the medical treatments and decisions, Camilla adopted a comprehensive approach to managing her bipolar disorder. She made significant lifestyle changes, focusing on diet and exercise as part of her overall strategy. These changes were instrumental in stabilizing her mood and improving her general well-being. The integration of a healthier diet and regular physical activity assisted Camilla in gaining better control of her symptoms, particularly since her episodes appeared closely linked to the postnatal period.

The journey to finding stability was neither simple nor straightforward. Despite the challenges, Camilla's proactive approach to her health and the strong support network provided by her family played a crucial role in her ability to manage her condition effectively. Her experience underscores the critical importance of early intervention and the ongoing need for a tailored treatment plan that addresses both medical and lifestyle factors.

Camilla's story is a testament to the resilience and determination required to navigate bipolar disorder, particularly when it intersects with the demands of new motherhood. Her ability to adapt and manage her condition through a combination of medication, lifestyle changes, and family support highlights the complexities of living with bipolar disorder. It also serves as a reminder of the significant impact that mental illness can have on people and their loved ones.

Through her journey, Camilla has managed to forge a more stable and balanced life for herself and her family. Her experience illustrates the importance of a holistic approach to mental health, integrating medical treatment with practical lifestyle adjustments. By addressing her condition with a multifaceted strategy, Camilla has been able to find a sense of stability and maintain a more manageable life, demonstrating the possibility of leading a satisfactory life no matter how many setbacks from bipolar disorder she faced.

## **Asher's Battle With Addiction and Bipolar: A Wake-Up Call**

Asher's experience with bipolar disorder and substance abuse is a poignant example of the complex interplay between mental illness and addiction. Before being diagnosed in early 2016, Asher's life had been characterized by a vibrant, energetic personality that often drew people to him. He was known for being the life of the party, and Asher's weekends were dominated by heavy drinking and recreational drug use. These substances, while providing temporary relief and a sense of escape, began to exacerbate the underlying anxiety and depression that Asher was struggling with.

By 2016, the toll of Asher's lifestyle had become glaringly apparent. His routine of binge drinking from Thursday evening until Sunday night, followed by a period of intense anxiety and depression until the following Thursday, had taken a severe toll on his mental health. This cycle of self-medication provided fleeting relief, but it left him in a constant state of turmoil. The pattern not only disrupted his emotional stability but also impaired his ability to function effectively in daily life. Asher's once-promising trajectory was increasingly overshadowed by the debilitating effects of his substance abuse.

The turning point in Asher's story came when his brother Nash's psychiatrist recommended that Asher seek help from his colleague, Dr. Dan. Initially, Asher's encounter with Dr. Dan was a sobering experience. Dr. Dan delivered a blunt and stark assessment of Asher's situation: continue down this path, and he would either find himself in a relationship with another person with an addiction, leading a life of shared misery or face an early death due to his lifestyle choices. This frank and unvarnished

reality check served as a wake-up call for Asher, highlighting the dire need for change and intervention.

Faced with this urgent wake-up call, Asher committed to changing his life. His path toward recovery began with a new treatment plan, which included medication specifically designed to manage his bipolar disorder. This marked the beginning of a significant shift in his life. The process of finding the right medication and dosage was not instantaneous; it required patience and persistence. Nevertheless, the new treatment regimen gradually brought stability to Asher's life, helping to manage his bipolar symptoms more effectively.

Despite the progress made with his bipolar management, Asher continued to grapple with his substance abuse issues. Alcohol remained a challenging aspect of his recovery, often complicating his progress. The struggle with addiction was a persistent hurdle, but Asher's growing awareness of its impact and his determination to overcome it provided a foundation for positive change. His engagement to Ellen and the birth of their son, Albert, were pivotal moments that further fueled his motivation. Ellen's support and the question she posed—"How do you want Albert to see you as he grows up?"—served as a powerful catalyst for Asher's commitment to change. It was a question that prompted Asher to reflect deeply on the kind of person he wanted to be and the legacy he wished to leave for his child.

Asher's path to recovery was not just about overcoming personal struggles but also about rebuilding and excelling in various aspects of his life. Professionally, Asher found success as a project manager for a large construction company in Melbourne. This role was a testament to his skills, dedication, and resilience. His success in this field mirrored his earlier achievements, highlighting his potential despite the challenges he faced. Asher had previously been a standout performer in his plumbing apprenticeship, earning the title of Apprentice of the Year twice. He had also represented Australia in lacrosse, underscoring his athletic prowess and determination.

The story of Asher is one of remarkable resilience and change. It illustrates the severe impact that bipolar disorder and substance abuse can have on a person's life and emphasizes the importance of seeking help, accepting treatment, and making necessary lifestyle changes. His experience underscores the critical role of professional support and the impact of individual determination in overcoming the challenges posed by mental illness and addiction.

Asher's journey is also a reminder of the importance of understanding and addressing the interconnected nature of mental health and substance abuse. His story reflects how substance use can initially appear to provide relief but ultimately contributes to a more complex and challenging struggle with mental health. Through his experiences, Asher has demonstrated that recovery is not a straightforward path but one that requires ongoing effort, support, and adaptation.

Asher's journey from a life marred by substance abuse and untreated bipolar disorder to a more stable and fulfilling existence is a testament to his resilience and the revolutionary power of intervention and support. His story highlights the importance of confronting the realities of mental illness and addiction head-on and illustrates the potential for personal growth and success even in the face of significant challenges. Through his determination and the support of those around him, Asher has been able to turn his life around, offering hope and inspiration to others facing similar struggles.

## **Mayla's Struggles With Anxiety and Depression: The Road to Diagnosis**

Mayla's grapple with mental health began in 2012 when she was just 15 years old. Her journey started with intense and overwhelming anxiety that seemed to grip her life with an iron fist. This anxiety was so severe that it made simple, everyday activities—like leaving the house or attending school—feel impossible. The anxiety soon spiraled into a deep depression, adding another layer of complexity to her mental health challenges. For a teenager, these were supposed to be years of growth, exploration, and forming lasting memories. Instead, Mayla found herself trapped in a cycle of fear and sadness that she couldn't escape.

Initially, Mayla was treated for anxiety and depression, which seemed like a reasonable approach given her symptoms. However, the treatments didn't provide the relief she desperately needed. Despite the fact that her older brother had been diagnosed with bipolar disorder, the possibility that she, too, might be facing a similar condition wasn't fully considered at the time. Instead, her symptoms were addressed in isolation, and it would take another four long years before she received an accurate diagnosis of bipolar disorder.

During these years, Mayla's life became increasingly difficult. Her anxiety made school unbearable, so much so that she felt the need to change schools in search of a better environment. But rather than helping, this change only deepened her sense of isolation and inadequacy. The new school environment failed to provide the support she needed, and Mayla's mental health continued to deteriorate. The pressure of trying to keep up with her peers while battling her internal demons became too much, and she found herself withdrawing even further.

In an effort to keep her engaged with her education, we decided to try distance education. At first, this seemed like a potential solution, offering her the flexibility to study from home and avoid the social pressures of a traditional school setting. However, the reality proved to be much more challenging than anticipated. The lack of structure and routine made it difficult for Mayla to stay motivated and focused on

her studies. Her mental health struggles left her feeling disconnected, and she found it increasingly difficult to keep up with her coursework. Eventually, Mayla was unable to complete Year 9, which was a significant concern for her and the family at large.

I was deeply worried about her future. Watching my once vibrant daughter struggle so much was heartbreaking. The family had already faced mental health challenges with Mayla's older brother, Nash, but each journey is unique, and Mayla's path was proving to be a particularly difficult one. Despite these challenges, we remained supportive, knowing that finding the proper help was crucial to her well-being.

It wasn't until mid-2016 that a breakthrough came. Mayla began seeing Dr. Vanessa, who was Dr. Dan's wife and a mental health professional with expertise in treating bipolar disorder. Dr. Vanessa's approach was thorough and compassionate, and after several sessions, she diagnosed Mayla with bipolar disorder. It finally provided a clear explanation for the years of suffering Mayla had endured and opened the door to more effective treatment options.

Following her diagnosis, Mayla began a new treatment plan that included a combination of medications tailored to manage her bipolar symptoms. Finding the right balance of medication was not an easy process. It took several years of adjustments and close monitoring before Mayla's condition stabilized. There were times when the side effects of the medication were almost as challenging as the symptoms they were meant to treat. Despite these setbacks, Mayla persisted, driven by the hope of reclaiming her life.

As her mental health gradually improved, Mayla began to rebuild her life, starting with her education and her work in hospitality, where she was made a shift manager. She enrolled in a marketing course, which marked a significant turning point in her journey. She felt a sense of purpose and direction for the first time in years. The coursework provided a welcome distraction from her mental health struggles and helped her regain confidence in her abilities. Completing the marketing qualification was a significant achievement, symbolizing not only academic success but also personal resilience.

With her new qualification in hand, Mayla secured a position with a large clothing company. Her hard work and determination paid off, and she quickly rose through the ranks to become a store manager. This role brought new challenges but also a sense of fulfillment that had been missing from her life for so long. Managing a store required her to use the skills she had developed during her studies, as well as new ones she had honed on the job. It also provided her with a structured environment, which was crucial in helping her maintain her mental health stability.

Mayla's personal life also began to flourish during this time. She met Colin, who became a significant source of support and love in her life. Their relationship grew stronger over the years, and they eventually became engaged. The couple has set a wedding date for February 2025, a milestone that Mayla looks forward to with great

anticipation. The prospect of building a future with someone who understands and supports her journey is a source of immense joy for her.

Today, Mayla's life is a testament to her strength and resilience. While her journey has been marked by significant challenges, including the struggle to receive an accurate diagnosis and find effective treatment, she has emerged stronger and more determined than ever. Her story is a powerful reminder that, even in the face of overwhelming adversity, it is possible to find hope and rebuild one's life. Mayla's journey continues, but with the support of her loved ones and her own undying commitment, she is well on her way to a brighter future.

## **My Own Experience: A Late-Life Diagnosis and the Journey to Recovery**

My journey with bipolar disorder began in late 2016, triggered by an event that shattered my world and led me down a dark path. I had fallen victim to an online dating scam, which left me emotionally devastated and spiraled into a severe depression. This culminated in a serious suicide attempt, which resulted in my first hospitalization. It was after I left the hospital that I visited Dr. Vanessa, and she diagnosed me with bipolar disorder.

The initial phase of my treatment for bipolar affective disorder was nothing short of harrowing. The doctors tried various medications to stabilize my condition, but finding the right balance was an immense challenge that took eight long months. Each adjustment felt like a new experiment as I struggled to manage the extreme highs of mania and the devastating lows of major depression, often accompanied by suicidal thoughts. Dr. Vanessa explained that these mood swings were symptomatic of bipolar psychosis—a condition that could be managed but required precise and careful treatment.

In addition to the complex medication adjustments, my treatment plan included four essential components that Dr. Vanessa likened to the four legs of a chair: the proper medication and dosages, adequate sleep, refraining from the abuse of alcohol and recreational drugs, and cognitive behavior therapy (CBT). However, while I adhered to the first three elements—maintaining a regular sleep schedule, staying away from substances, and consistently taking my prescribed medication—I struggled with the fourth. Cognitive behavior therapy felt like an overwhelming task at a time when my organizational skills were virtually non-existent. The very thought of adding another appointment or responsibility to my life seemed impossible. As a result, I delayed starting CBT, which left my treatment incomplete and my recovery that much more challenging.

The decision to undergo electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) further complicated my journey. I received 19 rounds of ECT, a treatment intended to reset my brain's chemistry, but the outcome was far from what I had hoped. Instead of finding relief, I found myself in a semi-vegetative state for nearly six months, my memory impaired and my ability to connect with the world around me severely diminished. It was as though I had lost a vital part of myself, trapped in a fog that refused to lift. The experience left me feeling disconnected and disoriented, a mere shadow of the person I once was.

Despite the overwhelming challenges, I began to understand that my recovery wasn't solely dependent on the treatment prescribed by my doctors. Many months later, as I reflected on my progress, I realized there was a missing piece in Dr. Vanessa's chair analogy—something that had been holding me together even when everything else seemed to be falling apart. I told her that the chair had a fifth part: a rung that held all the legs together, preventing the entire structure from collapsing. That rung was family support, something I had in abundance. It was my family's relentless love and encouragement that gave me the strength to endure the grueling treatment process and slowly but surely begin to find my way back to a semblance of normalcy.

Without my family's support, I doubt I would have made it through the darkest days of my illness. Their presence was the glue that held me together, giving me hope when I had none and pushing me to keep fighting when I wanted to give up. Their understanding and patience were as crucial to my recovery as any medication or therapy session. It was through their constant support that I eventually began to feel like myself again, and it's a reminder that while medical treatment is vital, the emotional and practical support of loved ones can be just as crucial in the journey toward healing.

Living with bipolar disorder meant grappling with rapid cycling, where my moods would swing dramatically in a short period of time. My episodes were often mixed, meaning I could feel both manic and depressed simultaneously—a torturous state that defies easy explanation. In these moments, my mind was a battleground of conflicting emotions, each pulling me in different directions. The manic side of me craved stimulation and excitement, while the depressive side dragged me into despair. It was a horrendous state to live in, and I sought relief in any way I could.

One of the ways I coped, though unhealthily, was through online dating. In my manic state, I became addicted to the thrill of meeting new people, the excitement of flirtation, and the rush that came from the attention. I craved intimacy and sex, believing that these encounters could fill the void I felt inside. But this was a dangerous cycle. In my depressive states, I would feel immense shame and self-loathing, but the brief moments of connection made me feel alive, even if only temporarily. It was a destructive pattern that I couldn't break out of on my own.

In late 2017, I made a significant change in my life. I moved from Ocean Grove to Melbourne to live with my eldest son, Levi. This move was a turning point for me. The change of environment and my son's support provided a fresh start that I desperately needed. Shortly after the move, in November 2017, I met Max, the man who would later become my husband. Max's presence in my life was nothing short of a blessing. He was patient, understanding, and supportive in ways I had never experienced before. Along with finding the correct medication and dosage, Max's love and support played a crucial role in my gradual recovery.

As my mental health began to stabilize, I decided to return to university to continue my studies. This decision was not easy, given the cognitive challenges I faced following ECT. My memory and concentration had been severely affected, and I was uncertain whether I could handle the demands of academic life. But to my surprise, I found that my cognitive abilities had improved significantly. I was able to focus, retain information, and engage with my studies in a way that I hadn't been able to in years. This was a huge boost to my confidence and further motivated me to rebuild my life.

In 2019 and 2020, I worked at a school as an education support officer, a job that brought structure and purpose to my days. When COVID-19 hit, like many others, my life was turned upside down. The pandemic brought new challenges, but it also led to important decisions. Max and I decided to move back to Ocean Grove permanently so that I could help my granddaughter, Ellie, with home learning during the lockdown. Moving back to Ocean Grove felt like a return to my roots, a place where I could find peace and stability.

By September 2020, Max and I had settled into our own home in Ocean Grove, where we planned to build our future together. Finding another job took some time, but I eventually secured a job as a content writer for a mental health service in Geelong in October 2021. By December of the same year, I had taken the admin role before being promoted to the position of practice manager in April 2022 within the same organization. This role felt like the perfect fit for me, given my own experiences with mental health. It allowed me to use my skills to help others while staying connected to a cause I deeply care about.

Max and I married in January 2021 in a ceremony filled with joy and hope for the future. Our relationship had been through so much, and standing together as husband and wife felt like the culmination of our shared journey. Since our marriage, my mental health has continued to improve. In October 2022, my psychiatrist delivered the incredible news that I was in bipolar remission. I hadn't had an episode for over a year, a milestone I once thought was out of reach.

Now, in August 2024, I remain stable and continue to take my medication as prescribed. My life has regained a sense of normalcy that I once feared was lost forever. Max and I are happy, and our home in Ocean Grove is filled with love and laughter. My journey with bipolar disorder has been anything but easy, but it has taught me the

importance of resilience, the power of love, and the value of never giving up. Each day, I am grateful for the progress I've made and the life I now lead, knowing that I have come through the darkest times to find light on the other side.

The stories presented in this chapter highlight the deeply personal and varied experiences of living with bipolar disorder, illustrating how mental illness can manifest differently, even within the same family. While each member of our family has faced unique challenges, there is a shared thread of resilience, love, and determination that runs through each of our journeys. These stories emphasize that mental illness does not discriminate; it can strike at any time, often when least expected, and the impact ripples through the entire family.

## **Key Takeaways**

- Mental illness, especially something as complex as bipolar disorder, rarely presents itself at convenient or manageable times. It can disrupt lives, strain relationships, and test the limits of endurance. However, in these moments of crisis, it becomes crucial for families to come together, not only to support the individual who is suffering but also to ensure that every family member receives the care and understanding they need. The emotional and mental toll of supporting a loved one with bipolar disorder can be overwhelming, and it's vital that the support network remains strong and united.
- The importance of education and understanding cannot be overstated. The more a family knows about bipolar disorder and mental illness, the better equipped they are to provide the necessary support and intervention. Knowledge empowers families to recognize early warning signs, understand the nuances of treatment, and offer compassionate, informed care. It is this collective effort—anchored in love, knowledge, and mutual support—that enables families to navigate the challenges of mental illness together, emerging stronger and more connected despite the difficulties faced.
- There may be times when you feel overwhelmed and think life will never be the same again. This is true, but it doesn't mean life will never be good again. With the right support in place and everyone pulling together, all of your family members will get through this and be better and stronger for it. Hang in there!