

What Stories of “Overcoming” Bipolar Disorder Get Painfully Wrong

March 30 is World Bipolar Day. It’s time to celebrate it differently.

[Andrea B. Vassilev](#) March 30, 2023 9:40 AM



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For weeks, my diet consisted primarily of McDonald’s fries, sugar cookies, and apple juice. I stayed home from high school for three months and then was excused from first-period freshman English all year long.

Sounds like quite the life for a 14-year-old, no? Hardly. I was on suicide watch and spent 24 hours a day with my mother by my side. I had lost so much weight that the doctor instructed my parents to feed me anything I would stomach. Even after things improved a little, I was still too depressed to attend school, particularly in the raw hours of the early morning.

That year, the year I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder, is full of painful memories. But it still feels like a victory. The act of surviving was its own accomplishment, and it was peppered with others large and small, from returning to a normal diet to earning an A in English (thanks to spending that suicide-watch time having my mother read *The Odyssey* to me).

Similarly, the 25 years of my life since have not always been, traditionally speaking, a success. And yet, I see myself as one.

March 30 marks World Bipolar Day, used to raise awareness of and celebrate those who live with the condition. The date was selected to coincide with the birthday of Vincent Van Gogh, one of the most famous artists to have ever lived and a prime example of someone who eventually achieved traditional success despite his struggles with bipolar disorder (a [diagnosis](#) many experts have posthumously assigned him). On this day, certain stories are spotlighted more naturally than others: lifetime achievement awards, happy-ending memoirs, and tales of “overcoming” illness to go on and do great things.

I object to the notion that only those who succeed in a traditional sense “despite” bipolar disorder deserve to be honored. These achievement narratives can be problematic if they’re not accompanied by more diverse and nuanced depictions of everyday bipolar experiences.

The triumph-over-illness paradigm overlooks the majority of people leading ordinary lives, lives that have often been ransacked by the condition. It trivializes the experiences of those who are medication non-responsive, unstable, underemployed, or simply overwhelmed. Stories of those who find the right medication and then refer to their suffering exclusively in the past tense can be inadvertently harmful to those who are actively struggling. It positions this condition as a game at which one either wins or loses, thereby polarizing the participants. Anyone who survives life with bipolar disorder should be able to define and celebrate what success is to them.

For me, the past 25 years may not be filled with traditional accomplishments, but they have been rife with wins: Enduring, not achieving, has been the cornerstone of my story.

At 15, I was informed by my psychiatrist that I would have to use a surrogate gestational carrier if I wanted to have children, due to the medications I’d be taking for the rest of my life. I spent the rest of high school and college at a hypomanic baseline, writing through my agitation late into the night in scribbled poems and grandiose ideas. My 25th birthday found me in the risky and risqué atmosphere of Carnival in Brazil—the ideal environment for mania. I crashed, was hospitalized, and was put on lithium.

A year later, I developed rare but permanent and disabling visual side effects from the lithium that had saved my life. I underwent 40 electroconvulsive therapy sessions over the span of a year.

A few years and many medication trials later, I finally had enough mood stability to work full-time, and 20 years after my diagnosis, I began a doctoral program in clinical psychology. I relapsed under the stress, but medicinal intravenous [ketamine infusions](#) made it possible for me

to continue. I then made the hardest and easiest decision of my life: to use donor eggs to have children, which would end my family's genetic history of bipolar suffering.

I've lived with bipolar disorder for more than 9,000 days. Some have been a joy, many have been a struggle, but all have been an accomplishment: I've learned my reality and built my success within it.

So, never mind "living well" with bipolar disorder—what if you're just managing to live at all? What if, like me, you have real limitations and recognize what is and isn't possible for you?

I am an ordinary human who, with the help of privilege and luck, has survived extraordinary things. I have struggled, I struggle now, and I accept that I will continue to struggle. But I keep going, and that is my success. Perhaps you do too, and that makes you a winner in my eyes. To me, the real heroes of bipolar disorder are the people who struggle but who get up every day and try again. The winners are those who radically accept any limits and flourish within them.

Occasions like World Bipolar Day are wonderful for broader awareness, but honoring our self-defined successes can and should happen organically on a regular basis. A question I often ask my clients, and discuss in my [self-stigma program](#), is "What are some gifts or positive outcomes of your bipolar disorder?" At first glance, people struggle with this inquiry. But upon further examination, they relish the recognition of their own strengths:

Bipolar disorder has made me far more compassionate than most could ever imagine. I've learned patience, and I've been forced to learn resilience. I've learned the art of self-care and have improved my lifestyle habits. My emotional life is richer, deeper, and more colorful than that of the average person. I possess a well-earned sense of humility born of reconciling my true self with my actions while in mood states. I see the beauty in every moment and every experience because I've spent so much time not being able to register that beauty at all. I treasure my happy moments because I know they are not guaranteed. I can accept and honor unpleasant feelings because I see and understand the bigger picture, knowing that nothing lasts forever.

This is in no way meant to whitewash the sheer horror of having this condition. But I've found it's helpful to look back and see what I've gleaned along the way. It gives me the opportunity to construct and celebrate my own story of life with bipolar disorder and what my successes have looked like despite, with, and because of it.

What I would say to my patients and peers on World Bipolar Day, or any day, is: However long it's been, congratulations on making it this far. I'll be honoring my own complicated narrative today with a commemorative meal alongside my husband and friends—a meal far more joyful than my high school diet of fries, sugar cookies, and apple juice. I'll save those for the rough days.

If you need to talk, or if you or someone you know is experiencing suicidal thoughts, text the [Crisis Text Line](#) at 741-741 or call or text 988 to reach the [Suicide & Crisis Lifeline](#).

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