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## **Living with depression – 'a long and uncomfortable road'**

### **Robert Kerr**

I stared vacantly into the bathroom mirror holding 50 painkillers in one hand, and a glass of water in the other.

It hadn't really occurred to me before then that this level of heartache wasn't normal, wasn't what everyone else was experiencing; but the sight of my own sad face made me falter. My resolve to get out of this frightening and depressing world turned to doubt, and doubt became panic, as I slowly realised that something was definitely wrong. I put the pills back in the jar, went into my bedroom, and sobbed. I was only 14.

This half-acceptance that my mood was abnormal did little to cheer me up, but I continued to be as lively and jolly on the outside as before. Nobody could see this horrible, real me, I decided; it was just too terrible to show publicly.

I found books that dealt with medical problems; I devoured anything that even began to mention incredible sadness. But this was still the 1960s, and clearly-written information for teenagers was still a long way off.

The best article I could find was in the medical section of a recently-issued encyclopaedia, where, under "Mental Diseases", I saw symptoms that matched my own almost exactly. Alternating upswings and depression – both without obvious cause – sounded about right, as were the "periods of relative normality" and the risk of suicide.

The only treatment suggested for this disorder, which rejoiced in the name "Manic Depressive Insanity", was electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) for the downswings. (This respected book also listed masturbation and homosexuality under "neuroses", so it clearly wasn't breaking any new ground!)

I deemed it safer, therefore, to hide this frightening beast that lived inside my head from the rest of the world. Perhaps if I kept busy it wouldn't have time to rear its ugly head again. And so, though a combination of hypomania and sheer determination, I maintained a confident and busy appearance to the world for the next 25 years.

I only went to a doctor twice in all that time – for a medical check-up for my mortgage application, and when I thought I might have meningitis. I was terrified anyone would find out I was insane, and I had long since stopped reading about manic depression for fear of what I might discover.

The irony, of course, was that medical advances had been so great that I could have saved myself much of what was yet to come. My teenage mood-swings, as I called them, lasted into early middle-age, when the pressure built to such an extent that my brain exploded and I went

into an extremely unpleasant dysphoric euphoria. A few months of that left me in no mood for more, and this time my suicide plan was a lot more thorough.

But I hadn't reckoned on the caring intervention of a friend, and I ended up in a psychiatric hospital for nearly three months. It was here that I discovered my illness had a new name, and a far more comforting one at that. "Bipolar Disorder" didn't sound at all mad. There was medication I could take, counselling I could have, and all manner of things to help me live a pretty normal life.

Was all the temperamental, pre-menstrual activity of my years of low-grade depressions not only unnecessary, but a waste of time? Had my wife and children been put through this torture needlessly? It seemed so, but then hindsight is always 20-20 vision. We can only deal with the present and plan for the future while learning from the mistakes of the past. I did the best I knew at the time. Now that I know better, I try to do better.

I left hospital thinking I was cured, but further mood swings shortly afterwards soon put paid to that notion. And there were new horrors in store, too. My employers, previously delighted at my exceptional ability to the job when a little high, now decided they no longer trusted me and "let me go".

My constant stream of new and exciting ideas, apparently boundless energy and my ability to implement plans all amounted to nothing after such a lengthy stay in a psychiatric hospital.

Consigned to the scrapheap before I'd reached 40, I haven't had a "proper" job since.

Slowly, I had to learn how to be totally honest with my doctors and not to put on a good show as I had done in the past.

Nowadays, I take my medication meticulously, but I'm still not completely stable. I get bad periods of depression from time to time, I cry myself to sleep and I frequently wish I was dead. I miss the bursts of creative output and the visionary thinking that accompanied my hypomanic episodes.

It often seems that everyone loved me when I was in great form (they didn't, of course) but few have time for me when I'm down. So, in some ways, I'm back to the old pattern, telling anyone who asks that I'm fine – no other answer seems acceptable.

I don't think there's too much of a stigma these days about being depressed, but being bipolar is certainly still something of a problem for most people. Daft ideas about what sort of a mad creature they're talking to stem from Hollywood films and scary reports in tabloid papers.

First diagnosed 10 years ago in the middle of a crisis, I have worked closely with my doctors ever since. I've tried several antidepressants and a number of different types of therapy, and in recent years I think I've got the balance almost right.

Clearly each patient has his or her own preference, but what suits me best is a mixture of tablets and talking.

It's been a long and uncomfortable road for the past 35 years, and while I obviously can't tell what the future will bring, I know so much more about myself now that I did then. I'm hoping this will see me through the next while, one day at a time.