

## **COMING OUT OF THE CLOSET AS A MENTAL ILLNESS SURVIVOR**

I was recently fired from a part-time teaching job as the result of my history of psych ward hospitalizations and experience with severe, treatment resistant Bipolar I Disorder.

Although the school gave a lame excuse as to why they were letting me go, which was later revealed to be untrue, it was evident that they had read some of my writing online about my mental health challenges, the twelve hospitalizations I went through, and the countless medication trials I underwent before finally finding the right cocktail of medications seventeen years ago.

As with most cases of discrimination, my suspicion is hard to prove. But it's hard to ignore the fact that they fired me right after finding my website online.

My website showcases some of the writing I have done about my experience with mental illness and addiction. There are several essays posted, as well as mention of the manuscript I am currently pitching to agents, "A Psychotic's Journey Through Eastern Seaboard Psych Wards."

I am proud of my success at overcoming Bipolar I Disorder. With family support, tenacity, bravery, and the right doctor, I have finally achieved stability after years of catatonic depressions, manic impulsivity, and frightening psychosis. My disease took me to war-torn Yugoslavia, to living in the Dallas airport, to seeing dead cows hanging from telephone poles, to seeing people's faces melt like waxen monsters. My disease led to two serious suicide attempts, countless failed relationships, and occasional homelessness.

But today I am a volunteer at an animal shelter, where I have worked for two years, and the Prospect Park Zoo, where I have worked for sixteen years. I am a productive member of society, a wife in a long-term, happy marriage. My life is fulfilling and rewarding. Keeping in mind how

far I've come, I am grateful every day for the gift of stability.

So, I write about my experience, to inspire other people who suffer from mental illness to keep pursuing successful treatment, to follow medication regimens, and to stay brave. To help families whose loved ones suffer from these debilitating disorders better understand what their loved ones are going through.

The philosophy of my writing is that there is no shame in having mental illness. In fact, most people who have psychiatric disorders face their problems with courage I doubt many mentally healthy people could muster.

One in five American adults has some form of psychiatric disorder, primarily Depression and anxiety disorders. One in twenty has a seriously debilitating disorder such as Bipolar I Disorder or Schizophrenia. (National Alliance on Mental Illness, "Mental Health By the Numbers," 2023). So, there are a lot of people out there who need to hear this message.

It strikes me that in today's politically correct society, while we all strive to use correct pronouns and cultural descriptions, we have not overcome our tendency to make light of mental illness, or use phrases that are, in actuality, offensive to the mentally ill.

"I'm Bipolar Today." "She's psychotic." "He's Schizo." (Expressions used not to describe a mentally ill person, but to casually joke about illnesses that wreak havoc on persons who do suffer from them.)

"Kiss Me Twice: I'm Schizophrenic," read a T-shirt I saw on a man coming out of the Union Square subway recently. Would anyone wear a T-shirt making light of cancer? Or AIDS?

Of course, I was disappointed when the school fired me because of the honesty in my writing about what I've overcome.

"That's what you get for putting your personal business out on the Internet," a friend said.

“You were a teacher. Maybe they were afraid that parents wouldn’t want their kids taught by someone who has been in twelve psych wards.”

For a moment, I thought about taking down my website, which highlights some of my writing about mental illness and hospitalizations. With this information available to anyone, I might have trouble working with kids ever again.

But then I remembered why I wrote those essays in the first place: To come out of the closet as a survivor of mental illness. To inspire others. And to take a stand: persons with psychiatric disorders deserve respect and understanding. There is no shame or reason for embarrassment in having a psychiatric disorder. Would I be ashamed to go public with an illness like cancer? Why should I be embarrassed to let people know I have an illness that manifests in my mind?

Because unless survivors like me continue to be frank, open, and honest publicly about our experience, the stigma of mental illness will continue to pervade our society. If I had to lose a part-time job because of my honesty, so be it. Shattering the stigma and discrimination against the mentally ill is more important.

Hopefully, if enough of us put our stories out there, if enough of us say, “I am not ashamed,” we will eventually live in a world where no one will discriminate against people who courageously battle mental illness.