



Overcoming Depression and Bipolar Disorder

By Craig Hamilton

Often in life, our greatest challenge, adversity or suffering opens the way for us to experience the lessons we need to grow. This has been my experience. If you had said to me ten years ago that there are hidden gifts in suffering, I would have dismissed the idea outright.

In fact, for a year of my life at age 37, suffering made no sense at all and as my life began unravelling on all levels, the 'quick fix' was almost always at the forefront of my thoughts. I was clinically depressed midway through the year 2000 and, at my lowest point, suicidal. Ten years on, I look back at this time as the beginning of my spiritual awakening.

There had been many taps on my shoulder during the preceding years and all had been ignored. My life was so out of balance in every area that serious illness was the result. After experiencing severe depression for most of 2000, I was admitted to the James Fletcher Psychiatric Hospital for two weeks in September on the eve of the Sydney Olympic Games. I had experienced a psychotic episode at Broadmeadow Railway Station in Newcastle.

For three days, I was in the maximum-security lockdown ward after being scheduled under the Mental Health Act. The subsequent diagnosis from the doctors was Bipolar 1 Disorder, formally known as Manic Depression.

In the years following that traumatic time, I have been able to reflect a great deal about the illness and the best way to manage it and stay well. There has also been an ongoing search for meaning, as well as the answer as to why this had to happen and turn my life upside down.

The next period of my life was spent walking in the 'house of mirrors' having an honest look at myself. It was not pretty. For most of my life, thoughts went unchallenged, decisions were made without any consideration for consequences and little responsibility was taken for outcomes unless they were favourable. My experience taught me a life lived in this way results in complete chaos.

Life can be hectic, stressful and chaotic, or the opposite if we stop and listen to ourselves and be honest about the way we live our lives. The choices we make and the responsibility we take for those choices is all part of the learning, growing and healing process. Change is always possible, and in my case, absolutely necessary.

If you watch the film *Groundhog Day* starring Bill Murray you will get some idea of what I am talking about. In short, if you keep on doing what you have always done, you will keep on getting what you have always gotten. The gift is that I have survived and can share what I have learned. I do not claim to have all the answers but

simply say I am more aware, ready to share and prepared to learn some more.

Bipolar Disorder, like so many other mental illnesses, has a stigma associated with it that makes management of the condition even more difficult than it should be. For many people with Bipolar Disorder, dealing with the illness and coming to terms with sometimes severe mood swings is something managed in secrecy, away from the eyes of even close friends and family.

I know there is a road back to good health and my main message is one of hope. Becoming aware of the benefits of meditation, managing stress levels, monitoring sleep patterns, medication, relaxation, exercise and reducing alcohol consumption are all part of a management strategy I have put in place to make sure the experience of 2000 is never repeated.

If you had asked me prior who would be the LAST person in the world who could be so badly depressed that getting out of bed in the morning was impossible and that the level of depression would lead to thoughts of suicide, I would have said 'me'. Yet there I was, in the deepest, darkest place I have ever been in my life with basically no real hope of getting out of there.

My self-awareness is simply more finely tuned today to my stress levels and when I need to pull back, slow down and rest for the most part, I do; it is that simple. In the area of mental health, I simply want to make a difference. I believe we all need to drop the stigma attached to mental illness and make it easier for those who need help to be able to reach out and get it.

Today, I am still working for ABC Radio in Newcastle. They were wonderfully supportive when the world I knew went pear-shaped for over a year. I will continue to tell my story and hopefully change some fundamental attitudes that are long overdue.

There have been many blessings to come from my experience. The greatest gift of all has enabled me to find faith and trust everything will be all right. A wise man once said: 'If you want to change the world, start with yourself'. ❖

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Craig Hamilton is an ABC Broadcaster and sought after motivational speaker. His book 'Broken Open' is a story of remarkable triumph that will inspire all who read it. www.craig-hamilton.com
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