

Bipolar Disorder: A Daughter's Experience

Satya Rasbi Khare, MScN, MBA

McGill University, Faculty of Medicine,
Department of Family Medicine, Montreal,
Quebec, Canada

ABSTRACT

My father suffered from bipolar disorder. His illness placed an enormous strain on our relationship which, for the most part, was filled with turbulence. Although our family physician played an integral role in supporting my parents throughout the disease, I did not receive the same support and suffered as a consequence. In this essay, I describe my father's manic and major depressive episodes, as well as my emotions that resulted from the experience. Treating mental illness goes beyond just treating the patient but rather encompasses the family as a whole. My relationship with my father may have been different had I learned effective coping strategies through the support of my family physician.

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My father was a highly educated man who immigrated to Canada shortly after completing his medical studies in India. He knew a lot about a lot of things but as his teenage daughter, I thought I knew everything about everything. We rarely got along. Discussions at the dinner table on any mundane topic would suddenly erupt into an all-out war as I would wholeheartedly defend my viewpoint and he would shrewdly defend his. Complicating our relationship was the fact that my father suffered from bipolar disorder. I am uncertain when his mental illness first revealed itself in the form of symptoms, but all of my memories of him are branded with his condition.

During manic episodes, my father's animated behavior was sometimes fun and at other times simply obnoxious. I can remember laughing uncontrollably for what felt like hours when he made jokes and cheerfully told stories of his past. Shopping was another activity we enjoyed together—although my poor mother would repeatedly suffer the shock of the resulting credit card bills. Conversely, my father could be so blunt during a manic episode that sometimes I felt deeply hurt by his comments or insensitivities. Despite the love my father had for me, he would mimic a school bully at times, as if an impersonator devoid of compassion took his place. I responded as any victim of bullying would; ran to my room to isolate myself from the situation and cried in solitude. But the habitual insults eventually took their toll and my response slowly progressed towards confrontation. I would have benefited from having someone to help me talk through the hurt instead of letting it fester, only to explode at a later time. On one memorable day, a detonation of negative emotions gave rise to a physical altercation between my father and me; him holding me as I swung my arms and legs at him. This was not my proudest moment.

My father's depressive episodes kept him locked in his room, lying in bed, sometimes sobbing like a child. I had very limited interaction with him during these periods. To be honest, I did not have any desire to interact with him then. Not knowing how to take his pain away, my strategy was to simply ignore him. Normally (a term I use loosely), my father would never miss a significant event for any member of the family, but during a depressive episode, none of us seemed to exist. When I completed my graduate studies in nursing, my father did not attend the

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CORRESPONDING AUTHOR

Satya Rashi Khare
5858 Côte-des-Neiges, Suite 300,
Montreal, Quebec, Canada, H3S 1Z1
satya.khare@mail.mcgill.ca

graduation ceremony. I remember feeling a sense of abandonment, followed by anger. How could my father fail to muster up enough energy to be with me? Not only did I struggle with accepting my father's limitations in the context of his illness, but I also did not know how to be compassionate in the face of anger. By this time, I had learned a great deal about mental disorders and although I intellectually understood what was happening, I was emotionally lost.

Between the phases of mania and depression was an intermediate phase that I would describe as an unprovoked visceral rage. As my father slowly came down from a manic phase, the same stories we laughed about together for hours became a source of agitation. Nothing was funny. Nothing was right. No one was happy. This phase recurred regularly and although I subconsciously knew that it was a phase, malicious comments made by my father during an outburst of anger would trigger an instinctive combativeness in me that fueled some of the worst verbal fights a father and daughter could have. My mother was always the rational one who stepped in and coaxed us to our separate corners. Perhaps her rationality was mediated by coping strategies developed over time, or greater maturity, or simply fatigue over the incessant combat. My lack of rationality, on the other hand, came from a mix of competing emotions that became senseless in my head and reckless in my actions. Either way, my mother's intervention would inevitably defuse the situation and the battle would dissipate. Sometimes there was a genuine apology between my father and I, but most of the time the psychological damage was done and never revisited.

This destructive cycling of mania, rage, and depression continued—all the while placing a major burden on my relationship with my father—until 4 years ago. In August 2011 my father was admitted to the cardiology unit at the hospital where I was working. With long-standing congestive heart failure, he would commonly end up in hospital for treatment of fluid overload. Generally, diuretic therapy would be successful and he would return home. But this time was different. My father was not responding to treatment and his condition was worsening. He was promptly admitted to the coronary care unit and doctors told us to start preparing ourselves. As my father laid in his hospital bed fighting for his life, I sat beside him gently stroking his arm. "Thank you," he said to me. I smiled at him with tears in my eyes and wondered if he

knew how much I loved him. I had this overwhelming feeling that had I failed him and lost the opportunity to redeem our relationship. The fights, the anger, the pain, the outright disrespect I showed my father; none of these things outweighed the love I had for him, but I never learned how to express love when confronted with the chaos that mental illness brings. The guilt I felt was unbearable. About a month later, my father passed away.

My experience of bipolar disorder led me to understand that mental illness is not a patient illness but rather a family illness; one that requires a whole family approach to treatment. The impact of my father's illness permeated the fabric of our family. As such, I felt equally affected by what he was being treated for yet I was not treated at all. My family physician saw all members of my immediate family; my father's mental disorder, however, was the focus of only those appointments that were limited to my parents. Despite numerous routine check-ups, my family physician and I never discussed how I was coping with my father's bipolar disorder, and as a result, I managed my feelings in isolation. More importantly, I never learned how to cope with the relentless cycles of manic and major depressive episodes that caused my father to metamorphose on a weekly basis. Instead, I struggled through feelings of sadness, confusion, anger, and injustice, all of which culminated in intense guilt.

It is unfortunate that my family physician did not broach the subject with me, but it is equally unfortunate that I did not bring it up with her. I knew I needed help to regulate my emotional reactions and modify my behavior towards my father, but I never felt jurisdiction over the topic. My father was sick, not me.

I have spent a lot of time reflecting, mostly deliberating on why I could not see past his disorder. My conclusion is that I could have, with the proper support. I cannot go back in time and change things. I can, however, tell my story. It is the story of a father's mental illness, a daughter's struggle to cope, and feelings of love, anger, and guilt that are with me still.

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