

I am well

The story of Wyn Viljoen

If I was a dog suffering this much, they would shoot me. That's what I said to my husband one day when I felt so crushed by the deep darkness that was within me that I didn't want to go on any longer. My mind was in so much pain. Life was a deep hole that I couldn't climb out of. No amount of effort could bring one scrap of light into the darkness. And my man's reply - this can't go on! I am getting you help.

I had known for a long time that there was something terribly wrong with me. I had good health, my own home, a great job, and good friends. I was blessed with an artistic ability, a good intellect. Why then did I swing from light to dark, and then to deeper dark? One moment life was acute, in focus, almost painfully creative. The next moment I was in mind torment, deeply depressed, unable to function, facing every day was a bone grinding effort.

I couldn't cope with my job, I let people down left, right and centre, study was impossible, I cried for hours, I took ages getting to sleep then woke in the early hours of the morning and walked the streets. My friends avoided me, I wanted to die. I went from doctor to doctor. One gave me a list of Bible verses to learn and told me that would cure me. The words just mocked me. Another gave me one week anti-depressant tablets and when that didn't work told me I had just got into a habit of being depressed and I was to 'snap out of it'. Another doctor was more sympathetic but the pills he gave me disconnected my head from my body so I couldn't function and shook like a leaf in a gale. I tried faith healers. I went to a 'charismatic' church that promised God's healing, and I paid thousands of dollars to them. But when I wasn't 'healed' after they prayed for me I was thrown out and forbidden by the friends I had tried to make there.

It was then I met my husband and for a little while knew happiness. I went on a huge creative high and painted dozens of pictures. But it was not to last and I crashed into the deepest darkest hole of depression I had ever experienced. I tried to kill myself to escape the pain of just being alive. It was then lovely man stepped in. He searched and searched till he found a psychiatrist who seemed to have insight into my condition.

This was 20 years ago when Bipolar Disorder was only dimly understood. But Dr 'P', with the aid of the detailed journal my man had been keeping, worked out a diagnosis - Bipolar Affective Disorder.



I was put on Lithium and the result, though not instantaneous, was remarkable. No more ups and downs. Life levelled out. But it was not perfect. I was constantly minimally depressed and my creativity vanished. But I was alive! For 20 years I lived a more or less normal life. I learned not to talk about my 'disease' as people did not understand and judged me badly for having a psychological illness.

What they didn't tell me was that the Lithium the doctor was prescribing was destroying my kidneys. When he finally did refer me to the renal unit it was too late, my kidneys had failed. After surgery I was put onto CAPD dialysis. This goes on every day for the rest of your life, but you learn to live with it. It becomes as much part of your life as eating and sleeping. They also put me on an anti-convulsive to control my mood swings.

Three years later I developed a rare complication. I kept falling over and knocking myself out. But no-one picked up on the problem until I collapsed with acute abdominal pain. It took [the drug] out my Pancreas! I was rushed to hospital and spent 24 days in ICU (Intensive Care Unit) and a total of 6 months in hospital. I had to learn to eat, to control bodily functions, to walk again. But my lovely man came 100 km nearly every day to see me. How I looked forward to his visit. Stories of the antics of my beloved pets kept me going thought some of the darkest hours of pain and illness. I received sheaths of cards from friends and neighbours. (Never under estimate what your caring can do form someone very sick).

In June I demanded to go home even though I was still very sick. By this time I was on Haemo-dialysis and had to travel 100 km to the hospital every second day for treatment. My lovely man looked after me like a baby – cooked, cleaned and walked me to the bathroom on my zimmer frame. He hid my pills in ice cream or yoghurt. He held my hand through sleepless nights. I woke each morning thinking I was going to die.

The visiting psychiatric nurse 'B' was marvellous, coming fortnightly just to talk. My GP was encouraging, although she did tell me that there wasn't anything she could do and I would just have to put up with it. Still I lay in bed day after day feeling that death wasn't far off. Then a 'miracle' occurred. A preacher on an early morning religious TV programs was teaching that the Bible tells us "we have what we say". "Instead of moaning, try thanking God for how he is healing us". Something clicked in me. I would try it. So every time I felt ill or a wave of pain, I would hold up my hands and say "Thank you God I am well and free of pain". Sometimes it was a real struggle as my body screamed, but I persisted and after a few days it began to work.



I started thinking “well” instead of “sick”. I began to feel better. Not a quick fix, but a gritting of the teeth and mind insisting fix. In the middle of September it was my man’s birthday. I heaved myself out of bed and made him a birthday cake. It took me all day and I ended up cooking in on grill so it was as doughy as could be. But it had icing and a candle and I sang Happy Birthday to him. He was thrilled (and secretly re-cooked it.) But that was my epiphany. I never looked back.

A week later I abandoned my bed for the sofa. The pills began to work. A Pathways worker ‘V’ began visiting me regularly and taught me how to garden and paint. I found I loved gardening. I got library books learned to propagate and fertilize. I got cuttings from my friends’ gardens. They dread to see me coming for a cuppa with my secateurs!

Now I am even giving plants away. Every morning I walk around my garden with the dog, listen to the birds and talk to my plants. It love it. I’ve also returned to painting after 15 years of no creativity. ‘V’ still visits and is delighted with my progress. I am happier and more stable than I have ever been. There are bad days when I go into the bedroom and shut the door and stamp up and down shouting “I AM OK, I AM WELL” until I believe it again and can carry on positively.

I now have a dialysis machine at home. It really knocks me, but the days in between are happy and productive. With the help of a good man and a good medical team, plus sheer determination and guts to just get on with living positively I AM OK!! I find the secret to healthy living with bipolar disease is:

- finding the drugs that work for you
- getting help from family and a medical team
- living creatively, one thing at a time
- avoiding stress and things that trigger episodes
- developing the power of positive thinking.

