The Living Stories – Laura’s Story

My name is Laura and I live with Bipolar Affective Disorder. Before I begin telling my story, I would like to start by acknowledging my privilege in being able to access and receive care from the same psychiatrist and psychologist since my diagnosis, which has given me continuity of care and provided a stable environment to try all treatments available. I understand that this is rarely possible and how lucky I am to have been able to have it; I would not be able to tell my story the way it is without this privilege. I hope one day our health system improves enough that this is the norm and not the exception that it so often is.

I was diagnosed with Bipolar 4.5 years ago at the age of 36. My bipolar has now been deemed as treatment resistant which means that all medical and psychological treatments have been tried with little to no improvement, so now my life is about managing the symptoms as best as possible with the goal being that I avoid becoming a bipolar mortality statistic and being able to be the best mum I can be.

I have lived with bipolar my whole life but without a formal diagnosis and with episodes that were sporadic it was something I simply existed with. While bipolar can be genetic, it is very common for the onset of severe bipolar to start after pregnancy and made worse with incorrect prescription of certain antidepressants. This is what happened to me. After the birth of my first child 10 years ago, what we now know were depressive and hypomanic episodes started happening more regularly and after the birth of my second child I was put on the antidepressant zoloft to treat what we thought was postnatal depression. It was after the birth of my third child that I was put on Effexor, which, in patients with bipolar can cause major manic episodes and it was this manic episode that took me to the emergency department where I would be formally diagnosed.

When I first got my diagnosis, and until very recently, I thought I could cure my own bipolar. I thought I could lifestyle my way out of it. I thought if I did all the right things that I could make myself better and carry on as if the illness didn’t exist. I took all the medications that were prescribed and spent 2 years trialling different ones, many that made me very sick or my illness worse. I saw a psychologist, weekly at first and then every three weeks. I tried to parent, tried to study, I tried to volunteer. I became an activist. In my head, if I let bipolar win then I had lost and I was a failure because I couldn’t cure it. I was warned at the hospital when I was diagnosed what my life would be like. I was told that my manic episode had changed my brain and that the nature of my lifelong illness had changed and it had now become severe. I was told I would need the disability support pension and the NDIS, that I wouldn’t be able to work and that I would struggle to finish uni.

I was told all this and instead of accepting it I fought it and in fighting it I actually made myself worse.

The thing with bipolar is that it’s an illness, not a choice. The brain I inherited after that major manic episode is one that I can struggle with, and it impacts my life in different ways every day. I fluctuate between depressed and hypomanic states with little time in between and sometimes have them overlap in what’s known as a mixed state. I have severe memory issues, I can’t concentrate. I get tired from doing the most basic tasks. I often get anxiety and sensory issues being in public and I mainly only leave the house for kid related reasons to places that are familiar to me, and as a result of this I have very few friends that I see face to face. The depressive episodes I have can be lengthy and its common for me to have weeklong episodes with suicidal ideation where all I can do is sit under a weighted blanket and wait for it to pass. In a session where I was frustrated that my brain didn't function the way it used to, my psychiatrist described how my manic episode had changed the neural pathways in my brain and likened a major manic episode as being similar to having an acquired brain injury. It has taken a lot of work, which is still ongoing, to grieve the loss of cognitive function and life I used to have and adjust to what exists now, and due to the fluctuating nature of bipolar, be able to adapt to it as it ebbs and flows. When I'm hypomanic my brain is sharp but fast, in a depressive episode it feels like I'm in a deep fog the whole time. Even writing my story I have gone from being acutely depressed to slightly higher functioning which means the edits on this have been wild.

We often read stories of everything that a person with a mental illness can achieve. The problem with that inspiration porn narrative is that it leaves people with a severe mental illness feeling like they are failures when they can’t lead typical lives, like they have lost the game because they couldn’t win the illness, they couldn’t just be ‘normal’ or functional or reliable. Letting go of what the world expects us to be able to do and learning to exist in what we can do is one of the biggest challenges that I’m only just at the start of being able to overcome. Changing my goals to be within the actual reality of my life so that I don’t feel like I’m failing every day is something I'm working on with the help of my psychologist. I hope there is a point down the track where I can contribute to society in other ways, small volunteer roles or advocacy. For me my biggest goal is being well enough so that my kids have a mother and if I can do that then that’s really the biggest win of all.

Living with a severe mental illness can be brutal. It can be a lonely life existing in a brain that can limit your ability to function like a ‘typical’ person. While I did not beat my illness the way I wanted to, I know how lucky I am to still be here, even if some days it doesn't feel like it. It isn’t always an easy life and sometimes it feels like there is no hope, but there is. The hope comes from those tiny moments of joy that fill our souls. The hope comes from acceptance and finding peace in the reality given. The hope comes in survival. The hope comes from the communities we form when we tell our stories and come together, and every day we survive. And that's what we are doing, every day we are here, and sometimes we work off just surviving 5-minute blocks, but we do survive, and we deserve to be proud of that. Each small success is a success. It might not be the kind of success we imagined our successes to look like, but we are still here, living, surviving.