



Bipolar and Me

By Happyness Mumsy Mzulwini

Around October 2010, while getting ready to go to work, I tuned on to SABC's Morning Live where the hosts Lee-Ann Manners and the late Vuyo Mbuli showed an insert of a successful business lady who spoke openly about having a mental condition called Bipolar Mood Disorder. She explained the signs and symptoms she had and expressed how easily available treatment was, and that this was such a manageable condition!

She further illustrated how she and many other successful people managed to live healthy, productive lives with this condition. Needless to say, there were also specialists of the field on the show to explain further.

Watching that program really got me thinking, especially since I had regularly gone to the beach, sat on the pier and fantasized about throwing myself overboard! At those moments, I didn't see any reason to live on – I felt so worthless... like such a failure! Often I would pray and beg God to take me, telling Him how much He wasted His time and energy creating me! Even when I was surrounded by many people, I would feel so alone. I knew that many people cared for me, but I just felt like I would be a burden on everyone else if I bothered them with my troubles! Not that I had so many troubles... I had a fantastic job, had received my Diploma in Business Administration and Computing, had a roof over my head and was with a man I loved... a man who adored me! Despite all that, I just felt so unworthy to live.

Then there were times when I would just be so happy! I wouldn't care who does or says what to me. No one and nothing would spoil my mood. Yes, I've always loved people, but when I felt that particular way, I wanted to shower people with gifts, bring joy to everyone... go out of my way to ensure that I share what I felt inside! Sometimes that was the most uncomfortable feeling of them all because I'd have a problem sitting still, almost like a hyperactive kid! Maybe I'd have to be serious about something, but all I'd want to do would be to talk!

Those feelings would not necessarily be provoked. They'd just come along. When I'm down, I'd just think of many painful memories... the deaths of family members, painful experiences I'd had... and I'd just cry. Sometimes I'd just feel sad without knowing why. The only question that helped me resist temptation of committing suicide would be, "Who would look after my kids if I died? Who would raise them the way I want them raised, or will they also grow up feeling like a burden to others like I believed I was?"

Whilst watching the Morning Live show where they spoke about Bipolar Mood Disorder, I noted down all signs and symptoms that were mentioned, and later compared them to my own. These were similarities: excessive shopping and willingness to keep buying; feeling down, lonely and worthless often for no apparent reason; suicidal ideology; extreme mood changes – extremely happy or extremely sad (Emotional roller-coaster), and anger management issues.

I also recalled specific incidents whereby I would draw up my own funeral program as if I was planning it. I once threw a knife at someone in a moment of anger. At the best of times, I would just go on a wild shopping spree! One thing that I always admired about myself though, was that I hardly ever bought things that I didn't really need! Yes, I'd first load the trolley up with whatever I wanted, then somewhere during my shopping, I'd come to my senses and return all that I don't really need before going to the till point!

One day I cleared the last R4000.00 from my bank account to pay rent and take care of other household necessities. Then I remembered how much I "needed" a new cellphone, and how certain people had been so good to my kids and I, and I had never thanked them! Oh, and I remembered the people's birthdays I missed! So, I shopped. All it took was pulling cash out of my bag! The looks on those people's faces when I delivered their presents were priceless! I even paid my sister cash in advance for a debt that was due the following month.

I left there feeling like I had been a fantastic 'Mother Christmas'! Whilst in a taxi to Durban central, I reached into my bag for money to pay and ensure that I had change for a connecting taxi home. I was so alarmed to find that I had NO bank notes left! I was left with coins barely enough to get me home! My mind started racing, I started counting everything I bought, and realized that I had indeed used up ALL the money!

After my mind raced for what seemed like forever, decided that only the truth would set me free. I sent my sister a message asking that she please return the money that I had just paid her. I explained exactly what I had done, and begged her not to tell the others as they would feel awful for keeping their gifts. She knew that I had been on medication for Bipolar Mood Disorder for over 3 years. What she didn't know was that I had started taking my medication irregularly (and sometimes not take them at all) because I felt so much better! As much as I saw humor in that experience, I learned that the doctors know exactly what they say when they instruct patients to adhere to their treatments!

After distinguishing similarities of Bipolar Mood Disorder signs and symptoms, I visited a doctor (GP) who confirmed my suspicions, then referred me to a specialist (psychiatrist). When I first visited the psychiatrist, I was terrified! Many thoughts started going through my mind... I forgot all I had heard about this condition and started being very paranoid. I had a lot of "What if's" I wondered if this didn't actually mean that I was going crazy slowly? Perhaps whether Bipolar Mood Disorder was just a route towards psychosis? I shivered like a leaf, but once I learned more about this condition, I managed to regain control of my life. I continued to face and overcome

life's challenges confidently. The best part of it all has been that I have never been alone, and have never had to wait until my next appointment if I felt that I could not cope! I could and still can even get telephonic counseling whenever required.

I've realized that one thing that most people need to understand to stay alive, is that they are NOT alone!

I learned that having a support system can be a deciding factor between life and death. Perhaps only a person living with uncontrolled Bipolar Mood Disorder would know how terrifying it is to feel yourself lose control of your emotions, knowing that you don't want it to happen, but just cannot control yourself... sometimes wishing to just get out of your skin and run a mile, but know you can't! Seeing as if everyone has it all together and you are just a mess...

Having someone who hears what you are going through, and still loves you just the same, even if they might not even understand what it is exactly gives you that courage to carry on. Fortunately for me, God provided me with a strong support structure.

When I was formally diagnosed, I went through a period of believing that my life was over. I became severely depressed, and unusually quiet. My manager and supervisor at the time (2010) assumed that I was no longer happy with my job, and was looking to leave the company. They confronted me, and after some time, I informed them of my newly discovered condition. My manager's response was, "Oh, that! Arg, that's just a chemical imbalance in the brain. My friend has that! You just need to take your medication correctly and you'll be fine!" That was such a relief! They both have been my pillars of strength ever since.

That experience encouraged me to research more about this condition, accept it as just another chronic condition, broaden my own support base by disclosing my conditions to others and educating them, and the general public about this condition.

When a person has a problem with the heart, he/she goes to a cardiologist... When they have problems with their teeth, they go to a dentist... Why? Because it is deemed "normal"! So, when there is a problem with the brain, why do people find it so difficult to understand that it too is just another body part in need of care?

Mental conditions are nothing to be ashamed of. Some people have High Blood Pressure; some have Diabetes... I have Bipolar Mood Disorder. It is just another chronic illness that is controllable with medical and therapeutic interventions!

A healthy nation is a productive nation.

The little that I have learned about mental health NGO's such as [SADAG](#) and [SAFMH](#) has made me realize that we share the same vision and passion to make South Africa better, one person at a time.