

# Eight gifts

By Jayson Blair

One recent morning after a restful sleep, I was greeted by my house walls being covered with a colorful array of Post-It notes with strange messages. Posters and stickers were attached to the walls and doorways.

A pyramid made of grilled cheese sandwiches and rolls of toilet paper stood on top of the washing machine. My diabetic dog's eyes were covered in a thin coat of fat, which told me he had gotten into some kind of fatty food that we don't normally leave around the house.

There was no question what had happened. My best friend, who also has bipolar, had gone manic. Over the next few weeks, I was heavily involved in an internal family crisis that included not only petitioning a judge to have my friend committed to a psychiatric ward, but also questions about the custody of her three-year-old son, and a myriad of other issues familiar to anyone whose loved one has faced a similar bipolar crisis.

One striking insight came from comparing the circumstances of my friend's first acute "public" bipolar episode with my own. I realized that there are some blessings to being involved in a public bipolar crisis.

As you may know, the public nature of my bipolar crisis was a bit extreme. I was a reporter at the *New York Times* and I fabricated and plagiarized articles, was forced to resign from my job, and had constant reminders of my misbehavior through the comments of loved ones, articles about the scandal, and television shows where the topic was widely discussed.

The awareness of loved ones alone can do the trick when it comes to the "Eight Gifts of a Public Bipolar Crisis" that follow. Looking back, I realized that my friend had been manic before, but had never had the benefit of so many people witness-

ing her behavior and giving her feedback. Her experience proved to be a teachable moment for me in many ways. Specifically, among the lessons I learned were the advantages while in treatment of having had family, friends, and others witness my behavior before being stabilized.

## 1. Defeating delusional denial

It is easy to ignore statistics about suicide and accidents. But once stabilized, it is hard to ignore the con-

cerns of loved ones who can restate the stories (so easy for us to forget) about our reckless and dangerous behavior in acute manic or depressive episodes.

## 2. Fighting minimization

Even when we remember what has happened, it is easy to forget how far outside

the bounds, or how dangerous certain behaviors are to us and others. Feedback about our past actions helps prevent the mind from minimizing events and brushing them off as not as bad as they really were.

## 3. Boomeranging deflection

Before I was diagnosed, I used to tell a colleague that everything would fall into place if I had a new boss, or if someone else changed. She would respond, "Sounds good, except there's one problem, 'Wherever you go, there you are.'" It's easy to deflect and project all of life's problems on others. Feedback helps us put the focus on the one thing we *can* change: ourselves.

## 4. Partners in education

When others know about our acute bipolar episodes, they usually reach for the shelves and pick up books such as Kay Redfield Jamison's *An Unquiet Mind: A Memoir of Moods and Madness*. When the people who observe us the most



learn about bipolar disorder, we gain insights impossible otherwise.

## 5. Combating complacency

It's easy to relax about bipolar when we have not had an acute episode in a while. Having someone remind us of the "good old days" can help us avoid complacency about ongoing treatments.

## 6. Eliminating enabling

Loved ones can find the creative aspects of bipolar charming. But this attitude can be enabling for the person who has bipolar until the damage done in acute stages becomes apparent to everyone.

## 7. Added support

You have people other than your psychiatrist who can talk with you and who have some real understanding of the disorder. These individuals have seen firsthand the evidence that keeps them from buying into any misconceptions about what bipolar disorder is and is not.

## 8. Partners in advocacy

Once other people see you suffer through acute episodes, they are more likely to join in your efforts to help others who have bipolar. ●

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