

Three: Tonya

It wasn't until I was well established in my legal career that I first suffered symptoms of bipolar disorder, and I had no idea what was going on.

I was born in Charlotte, North Carolina, into a large family with seven brothers and sisters. My father died when I was very young but other than this I had a great childhood. I had plenty of friends and spent a lot of time playing basketball.

At eighteen, I left home to attend the University of North Carolina for four years and then went on to Ithaca, New York and Cornell Law School. I chose law after working in a law office at the age of fourteen. My mother was a paralegal, a lawyer's assistant, and I was allowed to work in her office. I made copies and typed up documents. I enjoyed working there so much that I decided I wanted to be a lawyer. The idea of taking on cases that helped people appealed to me.

After graduating, I passed the bar and moved to Washington, DC. I first took a position with the Federal Trade Commission doing antitrust law, then joined the Department of Justice as a litigator. It was fabulous work. When the savings and loans industry went belly-up in the eighties, the United States government stepped in and propped them up with various accounting gimmicks. Later on, the government decided not to allow the savings and loans companies to use the accounting gimmicks anymore. When the government repealed the legislation that allowed the use of those gimmicks, many savings and loans organisations sued the United States government, alleging that the government had reneged on its promises.

Inspired Recovery

I was one of many lawyers working on these cases. They were high-profile, high-dollar-value, high-publicity cases. One of my cases was worth eight million dollars, and I worked on another that was worth well over one hundred million dollars. People were very interested in the outcomes.

I worked around the clock. My days were spent in court, cross-examining or examining witnesses, or at depositions. I did a lot of travelling when deposing witnesses and getting ready for trial, because I was also the case handler before things headed to court. I had the opportunity to work on some very high profile cases and I gained a lot of excellent experience. My career was going well.

When I first moved to Washington I was living alone, and although I did go out socially, it wasn't often as I worked such long hours. However, after living in DC for about a year I did meet someone, and we dated for some time before moving in together. We developed what I consider a quiet, stable home life. I was happy. I enjoyed both my home life and the very rewarding work that I was doing. At the time, however, I was under a tremendous amount of stress. It was a very, very stressful job. The hours were long and there was continual pressure to perform at a very high level.

This went on for several years until, when I was about 26 years old, I developed a myriad of symptoms that no one could attribute to any medical cause. I started to experience severe headaches and numbness in my extremities, and I lost a lot of weight. I began to experience paranoia, to believe that people at work were out to get me. One day I curled up on the floor at home, crying uncontrollably, unable to go into the office. Sometimes I would simply not go into the office, for no apparent reason. On other days I would leave at around two o'clock, without telling anybody and without taking leave. I started to behave in an irrational, strange manner and had no idea why. It was scary.

Nobody at work noticed what was going on. It wasn't until the very end of my time there that people recognised that something

was wrong. That had a lot to do with the way our office was set up. Litigators worked very independently. We were given our work and trusted to get it done. There was nobody there to babysit us. Our written work was reviewed and we conducted mock hearings before a court attendance, but aside from that there was a vast amount of independence. So it was very easy for people to remain blissfully unaware of other people's concerns.

I struggled with my symptoms for months and months. Being a high achiever, just like my colleagues, my deteriorating health was very hard for me to face. It was devastating. It was just so difficult for me to say, 'Hey, I can't do this anymore,' so I continued to press on believing that I would be fine. I also didn't realise just how ill I was, and didn't want to feel like a failure. So I just kept pushing ahead. Not surprisingly, without any treatment, things at work fell apart and so did my relationship.

My relationship collapsed for a variety of reasons. It came apart because I was ill, and my partner didn't really understand and neither did I. It fell apart because I was working so many hours. It fell apart because I was the primary breadwinner and my partner was accustomed to a certain standard of living that I was providing. If my job was in jeopardy, so was that lifestyle. I ended up very much on my own. It was really difficult.

Eventually, I had to leave the job at the Department of Justice. My health got so bad that I simply had no choice. In the end, I formally resigned twice. The first time I rescinded it. The second time I let it stand and went home.

It's a harsh profession, a hard environment, and this was a very unforgiving group. These very highly motivated, very high achievers were not the most understanding people in the world. There was a lot of work to be done and losing somebody who had my experience meant that they were going to have to try and replace me with somebody who needed to be brought up to speed. They weren't happy about that. I wasn't happy myself, but I had no choice.

So, after seven and a half years, I left and I went home to Charlotte to live with my mother. She was very supportive, but my siblings raised their eyebrows and people we knew certainly wondered what had happened. I didn't provide any answers and neither did my mother.

My mother was the type of person who didn't talk about problems and swept things under the rug. She was the only one I was in contact with prior to coming back, and she was the only person who had any inkling of what was going on with me. Even she had no idea of the extent of what was going on, and neither did I.

After I returned home my symptoms subsided for a while, but they soon returned. At first I wasn't working, so I would only leave the house during the day to do grocery shopping and go to the laundromat. At the laundromat, I began to sense that private messages were being sent to me through the television. When I was at home, I was certain my co-workers were judging me because I had ended up leaving the Department of Justice.

I'm not really sure how, but my sister who works in the mental health field recognised that something wasn't right. During a week when my mother was out of town, my sister asked me to meet her in a public place, our local park. When I arrived, she walked right up to me and said, 'You know, Tonya, it's a beautiful mind. Something is wrong and you need to get help.'

She took me to the hospital that day and told the staff that I was both homicidal and suicidal. I was stunned by this because I didn't want to kill anyone – myself or others – but I didn't challenge what she said because I was afraid and I knew that something was wrong. I was admitted.

That hospital stay was a very frightening event for me. For the first day and a half I just slept. Then I began to get up and venture out of my room. It didn't take me long to realise what it took to get out. You had to go to group sessions and you needed to participate. I had to make people believe that I was making some progress so I

could leave. So I 'made progress.' I began to interact with the other patients. I remember one patient in particular who would walk around the unit for exercise; I began to walk with him. We didn't actually talk to each other at all, but we would meet up and do our daily walk together up and down the hallway. There was another patient who had come in after attempting to kill himself by cutting both of his wrists. I remember talking to him about his experience. He was so disappointed in himself for attempting suicide because he had a family and felt that he should never have tried to do something like that. I understood. I was interacting which meant I was getting closer to going home. Soon after, I was on my way out the door.

Things were OK for a while because I was taking medication; however, I hadn't been given a diagnosis. No one ever sat down with me and told me that I had any condition in particular. I do remember seeing something on a piece of paper in my file about depression, so when they released me after eight or nine days, I assumed I was suffering from a bad case of depression and I simply continued with the medication, which seemed to help.

Life continued, relatively symptom-free. I took a teaching job and met a new partner. I took my medication for a while but then stopped as I had difficulty dealing with the side-effects. The medication made me unable to respond sexually and I was very frustrated by that. My relationship was in jeopardy because of it so my solution at the time – a poor one in hindsight – was to stop taking the medication. It didn't affect me right away. I had enough medicine built up in my system that I was OK for a while. But eventually my behaviour became irrational again. I started hearing voices and I became very erratic at work.

My mother was diagnosed with stomach cancer in May 2003 and died in October that same year. It was crushing for me and I went into an episode after her death. My living arrangements changed. I got my own apartment, started living alone and soon found myself back in hospital.

Again I was not given a diagnosis. Staff made sure I took the medication and attended group, but nobody sat down with me to talk about my condition, how to manage it and what was required to get better. Nobody there was practising good medicine. I understand that now, but I didn't realise it back then.

I came away from this hospitalisation understanding that I needed to keep taking medication. It is a life-long thing in my case. I committed myself to staying on the medication, and for the next two years I did very well. For a while I continued teaching and eventually I returned to the practice of law.

And I began to develop symptoms again. I'm not sure what triggered it. I can't identify any one thing. Work was stressful but not excessively so. I was working long hours, but I didn't feel that the hours were too much. I became unable to work and ended up on disability leave. After a while my employer was unable to hold my position and I lost my job.

I was becoming more and more irrational and eventually stopped taking my medication. Then things really started spiralling out of control. I stopped sleeping. For days on end I stayed up all night, writing poetry and working on a book about my life. Then I would crash and burn, sleeping the days away. I experienced delusions and believed I was a producer for the Oprah Winfrey show. I went around telling people that I was one of Oprah's producers. I went to nightclubs to recruit talent for Oprah Winfrey and a new business that she was starting. At one point, I found myself standing at the microphone in a club claiming that I worked for Oprah Winfrey. That night, a friend who knew me was at the nightclub. She saw and heard me at the microphone but she didn't say anything to me about it. Instead, she went home and called another friend and told her what happened. Unfortunately, neither one of them could muster the courage to confront me about my irrationality. No one told me that I was having delusions, so I continued to have them. And they continued to be about Oprah Winfrey.

I went on like this for months. I went on spending sprees. The spending sprees became so outrageous that I stopped paying my mortgage, my car loan and all of my household bills. I took all the money from my retirement account and spent it. I ran up an enormous amount of debt, opening ten new credit card accounts in the space of two months, none of which were being paid. Slowly, my life was unravelling. My mortgage was two, three, then four months late. My car was repossessed and I had to scramble to get it back. My telephones were turned off and my other utilities were in jeopardy of being turned off.

As my life spiralled further and further out of control, my family became more and more alarmed, but not proactive enough to intervene. Eventually I ended up back at the hospital, buzzing like a bee.

I went from person to person seeking attention and demanding their time. Finally, after several days I met a new psychiatrist. He actually sat me down and gave me the diagnosis of bipolar disorder and explained why he thought the diagnosis was accurate. He gave me a prescription for medication and asked me to stay in touch with him.

The medication helped to stabilise me and let me think rationally; and the diagnosis enabled me to finally gather some knowledge about my illness. I conducted a lot of research into the symptoms and treatments, and over time became very knowledgeable about bipolar disorder. This was helpful. Being able to understand my illness and take action really empowered me.

I became very keen to get involved in mental health care and activities and joined the Board of Directors of National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) in North Carolina to make sure that the rights of people with mental illness were protected. I also sit on the NAMI Education Committee. In that capacity I'm responsible for educating consumers and the public about mental illness.

There's an incredible stigma created around mental illness and it

makes it very difficult to work, difficult to date and difficult to live. I am a mature, intelligent, educated, professional woman, but facing the challenge of mental illness is hard in a society where people just don't understand. Despite this I'm doing well. Although I occasionally have relapses, I've been very well for over a year now.

Finding an outlet for having fun in my life is an aspect I'm still struggling with. During the time when my life spiralled out of control, a lot of friends distanced themselves and decided to have nothing more to do with me. I'm still adjusting to that in some cases, though there were a few who stayed in my life.

I don't have a partner at the moment. That's tough and I've been trying to figure out how to move forward in this part of my life. I am a lesbian woman and that's alienating enough in a small community. But when you add mental illness, and the need to disclose that to people who are close to me, the universe becomes even smaller. I still hold out hope. I view dating again as part of my total recovery.

The road to recovery has been really difficult for me because of the enormous losses I've had to endure. For a long time I was very depressed and seriously contemplating ending it all. I got to the point of doing research on the internet to establish whether the medication I was taking would kill me if I took enough of it. I didn't really want to die. It was just that the circumstances were so terrible and hard to face. But by doing that research, I started finding other things to read. I found accounts that were uplifting and encouraging from other people with mental illness. This gave me something precious beyond price – hope.

Once I had a sense of hope I realised that I could come back from this, with knowledge. And knowledge is power. This is what spurred me to read everything I could lay my hands on and understand as much as I could about the illness.

So my recovery started with a spark of hope. Feeling hope gave me empowerment, and it was this empowerment and self-education that put me on the road to recovery.

I became involved with a support group and through this, with helping other people. Being out there and educating the public about mental illness and participating in the various NAMI initiatives gave me a sense of purpose.

I am working again now, and I write a monthly column about health issues for an internet magazine. This month I wrote a piece called 'My Son's Keeper', about a woman whose son has schizophrenia. I've also written my own story, an article called 'Coming Out of the Shadows: Living with Bipolar Disorder'.

To anyone out there facing mental health issues, I encourage you to educate yourself. Being educated is so very important. You need to know all you can about your illness, medication and treatment options.

Secondly, I suggest you find a good psychiatrist. I have a really wonderful psychiatrist and I cannot emphasise the benefits of this enough. The relationship between the individual and the psychiatrist is very important to recovery and healing.

Finally, I encourage you to find hope. Read everything you can about people who have overcome similar challenges to the ones you face. Read, talk and listen and find that spark of hope that you need to start taking control of your life again.