



Raising a Child with Bipolar Disorder

Posted in: **Regular Story**

By Glenn Cook

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As I write this, my 11-year-old daughter is sitting at the turn of the stairs between the main level and second floor of our home. Feral sounds are coming from deep in her troubled soul.

The fact that I'm writing this now should tell you something. Sobs and screams are nothing new, but rather part of an ongoing bipolar cycle.

It's a cycle that storms from "I can do anything!" to "I can't do anything and no one understands me!"—from inviting the neighborhood to an impromptu basement sleepover to "Everybody hates me!"

I witness, and often participate in, this mental ping-pong match, with a field-level position for the square off between the opposite extremes of my daughter's personality. But when the spillover begins, when anger and confusion turn to this horrible, morale-crushing sadness, I'm usually not welcome.

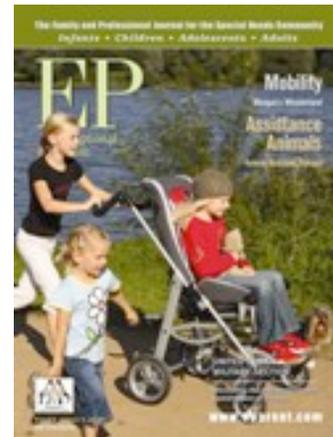
"MOMMY! MOMMMM-EE-EEE!"

I go to check on her, but she curls tighter in her fetal ball. She looks up and says, "Leave ... me ... alone" in an almost guttural voice, then screams for her mother again. It's pointless to argue, so here I sit, living a version of the first 20 minutes of *Saving Private Ryan*.

I've written about my daughter for her entire life. It's how I explain to myself and others what it's like to be her parent, one of the two people most responsible for her well-being. The right words elude me more often than not.

My wife — bone weary from the day, the week, the responsibility that work and raising three children bring — tries to soothe our firstborn. Heroically, she helps our daughter navigate the tangled world of activities, adolescence, friendships, siblings, and sixth grade.

More often than not, I feel helpless.



At times, my daughter talks in a rat-a-tat-tat cadence, tapping from topic to topic with little rhyme and less reason. So much information is being processed that she can't get the words out fast enough.

In quiet moments, when she is acutely self-aware, she says her brain is constantly pounding because she has so many thoughts to sort through. She calls it "eating steak through a straw."

Then at times like tonight, you pray that she will just come back from the deep dark hole, that soon she'll be standing in front of you, yearning for love and approval, knowing that what happened just wasn't "right."

Since I started writing, this part of the cycle has begun. She has calmed down, come in for a hug, said she was sorry, and quibbled briefly with her mother over getting something else to eat. It's 9:30 p.m., and she is asking, with dark circles under her eyes, for something sweet.

Mom knows better than to relent. (Remember this formula: Late Night Sugar + ADHD + Bipolar = False Energy with a HUGE Downside.) Fortunately, for all concerned, there is no further argument.

This is not always the case.

This also is not your typical adolescence. It's not how any of us imagined it; no parent or child would. It's almost unfathomable to think we are the lucky ones in terms of the bipolar spectrum.

But, from what we see and read, we are. She's doing well in school, relatively speaking, although holes in her learning are becoming more exposed as she gets older. She's gifted in many ways, none in the traditional, linear sense. And she holds it together outside the home, which serves as both her cage and her sanctuary.

Amazingly, she has maintained a sense of wonder that remains childlike even as she approaches the teen years. She's extremely artistic and creative, never more than while manic. But even in non-manic modes, she loves—needs, desperately so—to be doing something.

Down time is for sissies.

She is drawn innocently to similarly wounded souls, fawning over animals and friends until something (who knows what?) draws her attention away for good. She's not being spiteful; truly she is not. It's just impossible to focus on anything for too long, so we follow behind and inevitably pick up the pieces.

Blessed with a dancer's lithe body, she moves across the floor with a grace and beauty that will make your jaw drop. When her jaw juts to the side, you should worry.

That's when you can see "it"—that place behind her eyes.

"It" courses through her movements, gestures, actions, the tics that

may or may not be medicine related. All are hints that something isn't right; more often than not, "it" is quite wrong.

A few minutes ago, I checked on her. She is finally, fitfully asleep. In eight to nine hours, the starter pistol will fire again, beginning another cycle full of promise, dread, and the question, "Who knows what the day will bring?"

Who knows, indeed?

Friends who don't know ask if nights like this leave me numb. That's not the right word, but I struggle to explain my daughter to myself, let alone to her siblings or to others who aren't in this position.

You can't allow yourself to be numb; parental diligence demands that you not. Mostly, I manage to separate the two — the child and "it" — understanding that we're not alone. Other parents and families deal with much worse.

All I can say is damn "it."

I will never say damn her.

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