

# Part One: Hope Denied



Photo by Michael A. Wollen; January 2009; [www.mindtapmedia.com](http://www.mindtapmedia.com)

## **Coping with Mental Illness**

Bipolar disorder, also known as manic-depressive behavior, is a change in the brain that causes severe mood swings. The afflictions can vary from *hypomania*, a mild form of the illness, to full-blown *mania*. People with hypomania are energetic, overflow with ideas, are charismatic, but are often irritable. Many folks afflicted with the symptoms lead a normal life and hold responsible jobs. They have articulate verbal skills, are socially active, easy to approach, and find pleasure in small things. The person is most productive during the *high*, but this elevated mood cannot be sustained and eventually gives way to depression. The full-blown *mania* is more severe. It affects function and the person becomes a slave of the affliction. Mania distresses each person differently. Some go into remission and maintain well-controlled mood swings; others suffer from rapid cycles of highs and lows as if bobbing on the ocean in a boat with no power, torn by the waves.

The first sign that something might be wrong with a loved one is a change in everyday routine. The healthy spouse is often the first to notice this transformation. It may begin with a squabble about something trivial. Reasoning no longer works. Nothing satisfies, and trying to calm the aggravation only agitates the situation. An argument breaks out and the healthy spouse wonders what on earth has brought on such a commotion. He or she takes blame for not having handled the situation better. Then, after a few days or weeks, the low turns into exuberant highs of joy and happiness. The affected person explodes with glee and energy, and the previous incident is all but forgotten. As enjoyable as this ecstasy might be, it is short-lived. As sunshine gives way to rain, so also will the low mood return, perhaps darker than before.

The symptoms of bipolar manifest themselves in many ways. During the high the affected person is easy going, likes to talk, is creative, and achieves great things. The mania may be accompanied by a shopping spree and having difficulty sleeping at night. The patient may get overly optimistic and draw up grandiose plans that lack prudence and good judgment. The low cycles are marked with social withdrawal, unusual messiness, sudden loss of interest in favorite activities, pacing for no apparent reason, inability to sit still, prolonged staring with no focus, and deteriorating personal hygiene. The person may make odd remarks while in conversation with others, laugh at something that isn't funny, cry excessively, or not be able to cry. He or she may also display unfounded hostility and anger against certain people, accuse them wrongly, and express a lack of compassion.

In advanced stages, hallucinations can occur. The patient becomes disoriented and sees, hears, and smells things that are not real. This is often associated with delusions and the patient may utter things that are imagined. He or she might assume the role of a prophet, chosen for a spiritual mission, only to fall into helpless depression and wanting to die. Some become overly religious, always talking about God, praying aloud in public, and preaching gloom and doom. At this stage in the illness, a patient must be carefully observed because there is an increased possibility of suicide.

Clinical depression is more than feeling low. Something is wrong medically. The afflicted person knows about the changes and wants to hide the failing mental perception. He or she is embarrassed to talk about the weird and unexplainable phenomenon that is happening in the head. It would be best to seek medical treatment

right away but denial is common. The earlier the person can be treated, the better the prognosis will be.

Depression is on the rise in the Western World and according to studies conducted by the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI), about two million adults suffer from a bipolar disorder in the U.S. Women are affected twice as often as men. Left untreated, the patient can plunge into absolute hell during the low cycle. There is no fix-all medication but drugs and therapies help reduce the symptoms.

## **Personality Disorders**

Many people also suffer from various forms of personality disorders. These are not clinical illnesses but inflict great stress on a marriage nevertheless. A Harvard Mental Health Letter (June 2006) describes this condition in a paper entitled, "References for Borderline Personality Disorder."

Personality disorder is defined as stable, pervasive and inflexible patterns of perception, thinking and behavior that cause serious distress or disability. These patterns involve personal relationships, habits of thinking and the control of impulse and emotions. People with personality disorders are difficult to live and work with and respond poorly to stress and change... Its typical features are erratic moods, turbulent personal relationships, inability to control anger and destructive behavior. People with borderline personality disorder are often chronically angry and quick to take offense. They become suddenly depressed, irritable, anxious or enraged for reasons not obvious to others. They cannot tolerate solitude or keep company without constant conflict... They fear abandonment but repeatedly provoke it by plaguing others with unreasonable demands and complaints.

*Excerpt from Harvard Mental Health Letter (June 2006)*

It is difficult to distinguish between a *personality disorder* and a mild *psychotic illness* because the behavior patterns are similar. There are no defined boundaries and doctors choose medication by trial and error. They insist, however, that personality disorder and clinical depression are not related and maintain that one does not lead to the other.

## **Circumstantial Depression**

Not all depression is mental illness, nor does feeling low lead to one. Circumstantial depression is normal and occurs if a family pet dies, a loved one gets sick, or one loses a job. Many also feel withdrawn during the dark and cold winter months. It's normal to be down for a short period. Our body needs revitalizing much like recharging a battery, however, we must come out of this melancholy and feel happy again.

We all experience mood swings. Those with pronounced lows and highs are often the more engaging and creative folks than the levelheaded counterparts. We know of many famous artists and masterminds who are, or have been, affected by severe mood swings. Ludwig Van Beethoven, Abraham Lincoln, Diana Princess of Wales, Harrison Ford, and Ben Stiller are just a few names that come to mind. These talented people have accomplished astonishing things during their highs and have gained deep insights when down and out. Feeling overjoyed for a few days and then going into a low as a counterbalance is no cause for concern. Just as the high and low barometric pressure brings sunshine and rain, so also should we harness these mood swings for creative purposes to enrich lives and bring joy to others.

## **Deep-Rooted Fault Lines**

Sophie's illogical action began distorting the boundaries of what was right and wrong, and the children got confused. Rewards and punishments were out of line with reality. A good shopping trip would bestow greater tolerance than doing mere housekeeping chores. The penalties were administered by Sophie's frame of mind and not by the severity of the misdemeanor.

Lack of discipline connected with poor parental guidance prompted the children to take off in an unpredictable way. It came as a shock to me when I learned that my own youngsters got involved in illegal activities outside the home. Police cruisers began appearing at the house. There were police arrests and summons to court.

Blaming the bad behavior on parental ineptitude, the city authorities ordered Sophie and me to take counseling. After I explained the family situation, the counselor reckoned that Sophie was the cause of the trouble and urged me to divorce her. "I am a Christian and I believe in the power of prayer," I protested. "Divorce is not an option." At the

conclusion of the six-session program the counselor recommended divorce again, and I rejected the notion for the second time on the basis that it was biblically wrong.

I was naïve and should have taken the advice of the professional City counselor. Declining secular guidance and following a religious mandate caused the inevitable to happen. An earlier divorce would have been better because the damage to my family occurred *before* the divorce and not as the result of it. This is also the belief of my grown children who witnessed the disintegration of the family.

A 2005 study by *Statistics Canada* supports this view. A sociologist at the University of Alberta said, “The difficulties that lead parents to divorce are the very hindrances that impact the mental health of their kids. The harmful effects of divorce are occurring even before the divorce.”

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## **Divorce for Just Cause**

Marriage is built on the understanding that both parties are reasonable. Many marriages suffer from fundamental flaws that cannot be resolved. A spouse having a personality disorder or a mental infirmity is such an example. When discussing *divorce for just cause*, we are talking about marriages that do not function, cannot be fixed, and damage the nucleus of the family if allowed to continue.

After the nervous breakdown, the hospital recommended that Sophie and I take marriage counseling. I was hesitant to engage in such an exercise. I knew that this would only work if both parties were reasonable and willing to change. As anticipated, the counseling was a waste of time and money. Although based on Christian principles, the counselor ignored the root problem and followed the goal of reuniting husband and wife, regardless of cause. I wanted him to assume a leadership role, take examples from other marriages with mental illness, and base the decision on known facts. This didn't happen and we cancelled the sessions after six months with no positive result.

I continued seeking advice by seeing my parish priest. He was well connected with behavioral problems in marriage and understood my family responsibility. To explain the

severity of situation in greater detail, I handed him a copy of *My Story*, a twenty-page journal in which I had recorded the events as they unfolded during our troubled marriage. Without hesitation, the priest advised me to go ahead with the divorce. In a stern voice he said, “Pull through to the bitter end, even if the going gets rough. Don’t look back.” This advice helped me get through the difficult divorce proceedings that soon followed. At about this time, my family doctor called to say that continuing the relationship could affect my mental and physical health, and recommended separation or divorce.

I took the advice of these two professionals to heart, mustered my courage, and signed the divorce papers that Sophie’s lawyer had prepared for me. It may strike the reader odd that Sophie was the petitioner. I believe that her eagerness to get rid of me was connected to her mental illness. She was convinced that I was the cause of our family problems. In her eyes, I was an evil man.

### **The Decision to Divorce Falls on You**

Stepping out of a long-term marriage is a serious undertaking, and before signing the divorce papers I asked my Christian friends for advice. I had known Frank and Mary for many years and respected their opinion. What surprised me was their strong opposition to divorce, even though they knew my difficult family situation. Frank said point blank, “Your wife has given you five children, and now that she is ill and needs your support you want to dump her like a used tea bag!” He reminded me that marriage is an irrevocable union, ordained by God for the benefit of husband and wife, a partnership that cannot be broken by illness. Marriage is for life.

His words struck like lightning and I was reminded again of my immutable obligation to my wife as husband and protector, especially now that she was ill. I thought I had done my homework and divorce was simply a matter of signing the legal papers. She wanted it, and I had a family to raise. Frank’s position made me rethink my options and I started asking: “Am I moving against God’s will to destroy something that the Lord wants me to keep? Is this a test from God to examine my integrity?”

Guilt feelings collided with a need to find a solution. Moral conduct — a code dominated by emotional and religious qualities — fought with common sense, reminding me of my parental duty towards the children. My emotions seesawed in a most

disturbing way, fluttering like a flag in the wind, not knowing which direction to take. Abandoning the divorce would have been easy, but this route had been tried before and failed. Nothing had changed that would warrant a change in my plan. Meanwhile, the family was being crushed under its own weight and we could no longer carry on.

In a state of confusion, I asked God for guidance and spent time on my knees. Prayer helped set the priorities, detached from emotions and religious bondage that often distort the thinking at a time of trial. I believe that prayer guided me to the right decision by realizing that my ultimate duty was (and still is) directed towards the family.

I always held a deep spiritual reverence for marriage. The promise to stay together in sickness and in health was still fresh in my mind. I remembered Sophie clinging to me and with teary eyes begging, "Don't ever leave me!" I recalled the dreams she had, seeing me riding away on a white horse and disappearing in the dusk, never to come back again. I recalled my solemn promise to her, saying, "I will never leave you." As important as these pledges were, I began shifting towards the welfare of the children and realized that divorce was the only sensible solution. The family came first.

I knew I couldn't please all parties involved and picked the path of least destruction. By choosing divorce, I purposely broke my wedding vow, disregarded the teaching of the church and ignored the advice of my Christian friends. I took the advice given by my doctor who knew our circumstances and had seen similar cases leading to disaster if allowed to continue. I also accepted the counsel of the parish priest who was aware of the harm an untenable family situation can bring. He spoke to me as the *shepherd* of his flock and not as a church authoritarian.

Most marriages torn by debilitating mental or behavioral problems will eventually dissolve. Reconciliation is almost impossible and the "when" rests on how long the spouse can hang on. Engaging in counseling and seeking a reunion seldom works for the long haul, and the on-again, off-again relationship causes more harm to the family than a finite state.

The notion that all marriages can be saved with goodwill and dedication is incorrect and we should not be so naive as to seek reconciliation when a solution is not feasible. *The health of the family must come first* and rigid religious rules cannot stand in the way. If a divorce is inevitable, such interference will only confuse the issue further and inflict additional harm to an already hurting family.

Churches and religious leaders must respect divorce as an *immutable human right* on which to draw when other options are not workable. Nowhere does the Bible say that we must stay in an unworkable marriage. God is less concerned about breaking rules than achieving inner peace. Being miserable by sticking it out in an unworkable marriage is not His plan. The gift of life is too precious. Jesus knew about this and was careful in giving answers on divorce when asked. We read in John 14:27, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid."

I have met many devout couples who were very dedicated to marriage, spoke about its insolvency at group meetings and wrote extensively on this topic. Then mental illness struck and the couple could no longer live together. Divorce reestablished dignity and allowed the healthy parent to raise the children in a functional home setting, albeit alone. I've also met couples who entered marriage very casually. "We'll try and see if it works for us," they say, as if doing a social experiment. Many years later, these couples are still happily married and raising obedient kids.