

SACOSS 5 min speech
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Hello, my name is Kylie Harrison and I am a Community Peer Worker in the Metro team of Life Without Barriers.

I have had Bipolar Disorder for 16 years and am classified as severe. I see myself as an expert of one kind when I am well, and yet a bystander of another when I am sick.

I was diagnosed at age 14 because I went through a traumatic experience, which triggered my illness. I nearly died, and was air lifted from a country hospital to the city because I was in a coma having seizures for 2 and a half hours. This was the first time I experienced psychosis. I woke from the coma with amnesia. All I could recognize was my mother's voice.

It took a long time to partly recover. I was diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and Major Depression. I remember telling my first psychiatrist that I was not a textbook. Because he treated me like I was just symptoms -certainly not the holistic approach.

However it was interesting what actually brought me out of depression. My sister started tickling me. Next thing I was laughing involuntarily. After that I started laughing for real and suddenly I recognized my sister!

I became happy again- really happy to be out of the deep hole of depression. I soon was well enough to go back to school. The only problem was now I was too happy, laughing, making jokes and feeling euphoric. This was the first time I experienced mania.

The teachers soon realized I wasn't well when I kept asking strange questions. I would interrupt the class and would start laughing at my own jokes in my head, when the class was silent.

No one understood me. I'd be laughing and next thing I'd be crying. I talked really fast and jumped from topic to topic. I'd only say half sentences because my brain was thinking so rapidly, and for the first time in my life no-one could understand me.

My father said of my mania "Kylie can talk under water with a mouth full of marbles and call the last race at the same time."

Learning early warning signs and gaining insight, I now see as some of my greatest accomplishments.

To me it's not so much an illness- but a CHALLENGE.

PSYCHOSIS

When I cannot face the stress or trauma in reality, I sometimes go into my own dimension where I am confident nothing can hurt me. It can be like heaven on earth, my own la-la land where I am temporarily relieved of responsibility and believe my purpose is what the dissociative parts in my psychosis are telling me.

When I am psychotic I feel like I stop thinking and someone is in control of what I say, think or do.

I gradually lose reality and this is really scary when I have insight to know what is happening. I begin to experience distorted thinking- paranoid that people are after me or I am in a game and everyone is against me.

Growing up in a country town in primary school was great, as I had lots of friends, did heaps of sport and loved music.

At high school things were different. I got harassed constantly. It went round the town that I was going to a mental hospital and I felt deserted by even my closest friends. Because I wanted to be accepted I started experimenting a little with drugs and binge drinking.

The story goes: I had a small amount of dope mixed with alcohol, and became intensely suicidal. I began screaming that my life wasn't worth living. I ran up to the train bridge preparing to jump. Fortunately an acquaintance of mine talked me out of jumping. He reminded me of something I was passionate about. He reminded me that God cared about me. If he had said anything else that night, I would have left this world.

Because of the stigma at school and the community, I decided impulsively to run away from home. My parents were desperate and put bars on my window and a lock on my door to try and prevent me from hitch hiking. I was determined to get to the city, where nobody knew me. I consequently jumped out of the bathroom window.

"Recovery to me is about being part of the team and discovering a pathway through the unknown, to rediscover a certainty or reality within the delusion, some insight amongst the chaos and finding understanding as a solution of how to control the rollercoaster of emotions."

There are many medications. I have found the right medication for me after 15 years of trying meds. I never thought I would be able to work and could not even imagine I could live this well.

Sometimes I am very upset in hospital because it feels like I have been kicked out of the team. I often felt disempowered when I knew what would help me, but professionals wouldn't listen. Some people wrongly think if you know you are sick, you can't be that sick.

Much of my insight has been gained by asking questions of my psychiatrist whom I've had for 12 years. We have built an amazing rapport. He knows immediately if I

am unwell. My psychiatrist makes me feel like part of the team- that Bipolar Disorder is a challenge for us both.

I have an analogy about how my family treats me. I compare myself to my brother's BMW's. One is constantly breaking down and one is perfect. I tell my brother I am like the BMW that keeps breaking down, but he always treats me like the perfect BMW!!

Sometimes on my journey toward recovery I have run with leaps and bounds. Sometimes I have walked or even crawled, but there have been so many times in my life when I have said "please carry me, for I cannot take one more step!"

I do some visualization therapy with my psychiatrist. Once in a session I visualized myself with all the negative memories and grabbed a sledgehammer and smashed them to pieces. I found it very empowering.

I want you to come to the realisation that it is up to you and it is up to me- it is everyone's responsibility to combat stigma and create a better community with honesty and dignity.

There are a number of strategies for living well and for me these include : Sleeping well, eating a balanced diet, doing some exercise and trying to avoid mood changing substances like drugs or alcohol. I make sure I take my medication as prescribed.

I want you to see me, not just my illness. See me! I am not the illness.

The best advice I ever received was when I was 19, and was given to me by my mother. She said" Your illness is not your fault, but it is your responsibility."

My personal motto fits in well with the theme of this conference and is "excel today, to challenge the future!"

I am also a freelance writer and have developed a five minute movie that was shown at the Mercury cinema in mental health week 2007. It is on youtube and I am now working on future writing projects and have just received a grant from Richard Llewellyn Arts and Disability Trust to produce a poetry book with a focus on mental health. If you know of any group that might benefit from a presentation similar to this, please feel free to get my details.

It is about learning to take control and find stability. This will help the sufferer and their friends and family to find happiness that is not mania, optimism, that is realistic and not delusional, and hope for the future.

Thank you.

