



Living with or Helping Someone with a
Mental Health Condition

Eye of the Tiger

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I WAS A JUNIOR IN COLLEGE. It was the second consecutive day that I had spent in bed. I was on a steady diet of cereal and potato chips. A box of Kleenex and unopened textbooks were lying on my bed. If you added a pint of Ben and Jerry's, it would have been the post-breakup scene in any romantic comedy. But, in my case, nothing had "happened." I did not go through a breakup or an argument with a friend or fail an exam. This was yet another sporadic episode of depression.

Bipolar disorder does not care about your deadlines. I had homework to finish and I was competing with my Speech Team at Nationals in a few days. We would be traveling to Long Beach, California. Realizing I would not get any work done, I turned on the television. AMC was running a Rocky marathon. I stumbled upon Rocky III. Apollo Creed was telling Rocky he needed to get the "eye of the tiger back." Clubber Lang had KO'd Rocky in their first fight, and now they were training for the rematch.

I'd always assumed Rocky was a "guys' movie." But suddenly, it hit me like a bolt of lightning. I was Rocky, and Rocky's opponents were my depression. Even though I was down, I was not out.

That week, I did not win anything at Nationals, but I competed. And I finished my homework.

That bipolar episode happened two years after my diagnosis. My friend Dina's suicide precipitated my diagnosis. Dina had bipolar disorder. When she died, I realized I might also have this disease, and maybe that was why she had understood my mood swings better than anyone else.

I went to the library and read up on the symptoms—and recognized half of them. Since my teen years, I've fought inexplicable bouts of depression marked by crying spells, difficulty concentrating, and suicidal thoughts. Those episodes could last anywhere from hours to weeks.

Just as bizarrely as the episodes came, they disappeared and were replaced with happiness or periods of insomnia, racing thoughts, and great artistic inspiration.

A week after Danielle's death, I saw the campus psychiatrist, who immediately diagnosed me with bipolar disorder. I also sought a second opinion, which confirmed the diagnosis. The diagnosis was the beginning of freedom after years of fighting a faceless, nameless enemy. But it was not a panacea for my problems.

Learning how to manage bipolar disorder was a process. In fact, I missed a final exam when I was a transfer student at Northwestern University during my sophomore year. But slowly, I added more tools to my bipolar survival kit, including medication, talk therapy, building a support network of family and friends, sleeping on time, and maintaining a routine. One of those tools was Rocky. When I would wake up depressed or get anxious before a test, I would watch Rocky's fights.

I graduated cum laude from Northwestern with two majors. At the end of my college career, I was a National Quarter-Finalist in Extemporaneous Speaking and a State Champion and National Semi-Finalist in Impromptu Speaking.

Bipolar disorder was not my only foe. I was diagnosed with polycystic ovarian syndrome (PCOS) at nineteen. When I was twenty-four, Myasthenia Gravis, (MG) a neuromuscular autoimmune hurricane disease, invaded my life. MG attacked most parts of my body. Within four months, I went from practicing yoga five days a week to not being able to feel my legs. I underwent several medical procedures and was bedridden for over a year. I heard about MG patients in wheelchairs, and I feared being paralyzed. Thankfully, that didn't happen. Today, I carry a cane.

For the past seven years, I have awakened feeling tired and in pain every day. When I wake up, I play Survivor's "Eye of the Tiger," strap on my Rocky boxing gloves, and pray for strength. I tell myself, "I can do everything through Him who gives me strength."

People often ask me what it is like to live with five illnesses. I see myself as Rocky and my five diseases as Rocky's different opponents. Bipolar disorder is my Apollo Creed. PCOS is Ivan Drago. MG is Mason Dixon. Asthma is Clubber Lang. And, finally, psoriasis is Tommy Gunn.

God bless Sylvester Stallone for creating a film franchise that spanned four decades. Boxing has become a metaphor for my struggles. Much like chronic illness, boxing is brutal and barbaric. Fighting an illness (or five) is not a team sport. I can have people in my corner, but my body is the only one that absorbs the pain.

I am a writer and health activist, but my day job is coaching high school debate. A few months ago, we were at the state championship, which was held at a community college with a large campus. At one point, the other coaches and I reached an impasse. To get from one building to another, I had to climb a long flight of stairs. I closed my eyes and imagined the stairs were the steps of the Philadelphia Museum of Art that Stallone made famous. There was no Rocky victory dance when I got to the top, but I made it.

I realized that I had been using visualization as a coping tool for years. Until that moment, I'd never had a word for it. First, visualizing helped me fight depression, and now, my physical disability. You can call it "the eye of the tiger" or whatever you want, but visualization enables me to write my own story, every day.

As long as I can see victory, I can fight one more round.

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Group Discussion/Self-Reflection Questions

- 1) What was it like for Jessica to be diagnosed with bipolar disorder?
- 2) What was it like for Jessica prior to diagnosis and not knowing what she was living with (mental illness)?
- 3) How did storytelling help Jessica?
- 4) How did the *Rocky* movies help Jessica in her battle against multiple mental and physical illnesses?
- 5) What kind of professional treatment does Jessica receive for her mental illnesses and how does she personally cope with her multiple illnesses?
- 6) How could Jessica's story help someone who has one or more mental illnesses?