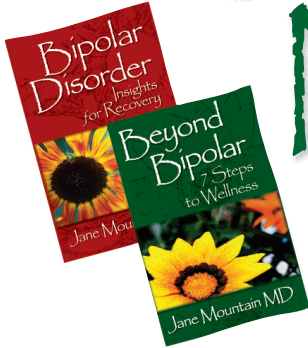


BeyondBipolar™ Newsletter

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Clarity, Hope, Recovery



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Wellness and the Wasp

Jane Mountain, MD

When we have an illness, we find healing in telling the story of our experience. We tell our story to ourselves and to others. Each of us tells it in our own words. Our family and communities also join in the telling. Telling the story is necessary on some level for healing to occur.

Wellness is our goal when bipolar disorder comes knocking. Often when we receive (or refuse to receive) a diagnosis of bipolar disorder, the focus of our lives changes from living a life of wellness toward fending off an illness. The illness experience can eat us up for breakfast, lunch and dinner.

Over the next 3 minutes, I want to tell you about a different kind of illness experience that involves a wasp and a trauma. It seems different from the usual illness experience, but it will unlock a few secrets about living with bipolar disorder.

The garage's heat bakes my husband, Chuck, and me as we look around for the tools to work in the garden. We're anxious get to the garden, to soak up the sunshine and breath in the fresh air. An extra bonus — I find my work gloves that have been missing most of the summer!

I tug the right glove on and immediately jerk my hand out. There is a huge wasp in the palm of my hand, brandishing its

throbbing stinger. I go into freeze mode from the fright and pain, but Chuck comes over and brushes the wasp away.

By this time I am jumping up and down with pain. I futilely search for remedies — baking soda, cortisone, lotion, anti-septic spray — I try them all to no avail.

When a doctor can't figure out a problem like this, she calls a nurse! The nurse on the phone adds what should be the magic bullet — aloe. I run across the street to my neighbor who has Aloe plants. An hour later the pain is even more intense. All my attempts have turned mind-grabbing pain into excruciating pain. When I finally try ice, the build up of pain becomes indescribable.

Reluctantly, yet driven by the raw, aching pain, I head for the emergency room. One pain shot and five minutes later, I marvel at the relief. And the question of how this could have hurt so much pounds in my head.

In both my books about bipolar disorder, I talk about the importance of understanding an illness experience. It's what we experience individually, as families and communities, whenever a medical condition exists in our lives. The experience of a medical condition is distinct from its medical description. An illness story is unique to each individual and community even though the medical description remains the same for others with the disorder.

The wasp story is an illness experience. It carries far more baggage than the medical description found in a textbook. Like all illness experiences, the wasp story had to be told several times to complete the healing process. As in all

illness experiences, my surrounding community told the story in their own words.

After being stung, I told the story again and again. The character development of the wasp intensified with each telling. I surmised the wasp made a direct hit on a nerve in my hand. After telling the story for a day or two, the healing was complete.



Interestingly enough, my husband told his wasp story as well. He described the wasp's swollen body and surmised it was a queen that was ready to lay eggs and start a new colony. He described my writhing with pain and holding my wrist in reaction.

I'll bet the ER doc had a story to tell about this incident as well. Perhaps he shared with young doctors that meat tenderizer, if you can get it, is the trick for these sorts of stings.

But what does a wasp sting have to do with bipolar disorder and wellness? The illness stories of the wasp sting have many elements of the stories we tell when we have a diagnosis of bipolar disorder:

- The story gets told from different perspectives. The person with the diagnosis tells a different story from the family member and those in the community, but somehow the story gets told.
- We may tell the story but deny its truth. (I told all about the wasp sting but couldn't believe how much it hurt.)
- The pain may get worse before we seek the things that will relieve it. We may try all kinds of remedies before accepting what will help us the most. (Not wanting treatment is not unique to a psychiatric disorder! I tried everything possible to avoid an ER visit.)

Next, there are ways in which telling the story of bipolar differs sharply from the example of my wasp story:

- Most hearers of the wasp story can relate in some way. Many have their own bee or wasp sting stories to tell in exchange. In contrast, others may not understand the illness stories of bipolar disorder. Many aren't interested or have no way to relate to our story. Most of those around us don't have a similar story to tell in exchange.
- Although the story of bipolar disorder is an illness experience, it is told in the context of a community that may lack information or that is resistant to giving up myths about psychiatric illness.
- We are not telling a short wasp story. Ours is an intricate, life long play that seemingly goes on forever.
- The wasp story was acceptable to my friends, but friends and family may discourage us from telling the story of bipolar illness. We may be afraid to tell the story for fear of losing job, family, friends or our healthy self.
- Sometimes we fail to tell the story about the illness experience of bipolar disorder because we are embarrassed or feel a deep sense of frustration or shame when others tire of our narration.
- In telling the illness story of bipolar disorder, resolution is not always found. Whether we are telling our own illness story, or the community around us becomes the storyteller, the wellness part of the story is seldom told. As a result we can become our illness and lose sight of

wellness as well as other healthy aspects of our being.

Healing comes through sharing the illness experience. But when we tell our stories, we need to include the chapters about wellness. Our lives must become focused on health so that wellness can be woven into our daily stories and the stories of our communities. This is not the same as leaving out the story of our illness. It would be cruel not to validate our experience of bipolar disorder and the profound impact it has on our lives.

And if our stories do not include space for wellness, our lives will be missing a valuable healing force. Sometimes the wellness comes from searching it in other parts of our lives and experiences. We can be bold to tell of our triumphs even though at times they may be few and far between. In telling wellness stories, we will be more alert to the healthy parts of our lives and we will be reminded to take steps toward wellness.

Our illness and wellness story can be like two sides of a coin. If we look at the illness side for too long, we will fail to recognize the other side. Hard as it is, we are challenged to turn that coin over and gaze at our goal of achieving wellness.

Turning the coin over to view the wellness side is the first step toward recovery and healing in our lives. It is an act of hope. Taking one small step at a time, we will first begin to know both sides of the coin. In time, we will recognize the wellness side more readily and it will become the side of the coin that we hold face up. We will readily recognize it just as we do the palm of our hand. We will be enriched and the healing that comes from telling our illness stories will be balanced by sharing our wellness stories as well.

**Telling the story
is necessary...for
healing to occur.**

Step Two: Manage!

Management Drives Resiliency

Resiliency is the key to mental wellness. When we are having depression, our low energy level destroys our ability to be resilient to the challenges we face. Mania can cause us to bounce around like a ball on an elastic band, but instead of rebounding to a reasonable space, we fly too far in multiple directions.

Resilience means the personal and community qualities that enable us to rebound from adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or other stresses — and to go on with life with a sense of mastery, competence, and hope. (*Achieving the Promise: Transforming Mental Health Care in America*, July 2003)

Becoming resilient means being able to rebound without overshooting our energy into depression or mania. Management helps us do this consistently.

Some of us can plan a trip to the ballpark, or organize a meal. Most of us can plan our wardrobe, and some of us can even plan a garden. If you think about the things you have done in the past, you may realize that you are good at planning some area of your life but not so good at others.

I was a good student and always planned my assignments well ahead of time. But do you think I can plan a vacation? Ask my family about the time we camped on the ground in a tent at the Hoover Dam in August when the temperature was 104 degrees at midnight!

Believe it or not, planning is a skill that we can all learn. We have learned the skill in some parts of our lives but not in others. Or we have skills that we don't always apply them.

When we don't plan, we fall back on coping. Our coping skills may be ones that see us through the most difficult times of our illness. It makes sense to cope the best we possibly can. But coping so often consists of reacting in the moment to the difficulties we experience. Coping can be highly effective, or it can exhaust us without moving us forward.

Management skills help us develop plans to deal with the challenges of our illness and to have plans already in place to use when difficulties arise. We can't anticipate everything in our lives, but there are some things that we can point to and say, "If this happens, I will do that."

Here are a few examples:

- If I have a frustrating day, I will take a break and go for a walk.
- If I am not sleeping well for three nights in a row, I will call my doctor or prescriber.
- If my thoughts are racing, I'll check my ideas with a trusted friend before I decide what to do.
- If I don't know what to do about something that comes up suddenly, I'll sit down for ten minutes with paper and pencil and write some alternatives before deciding how to react.

Finding resilience in the face of bipolar disorder is easier when we think of management to anticipate challenges. We can add these management skills to our coping. As we do this, we will rely on management, and we'll improve our coping skills as well.

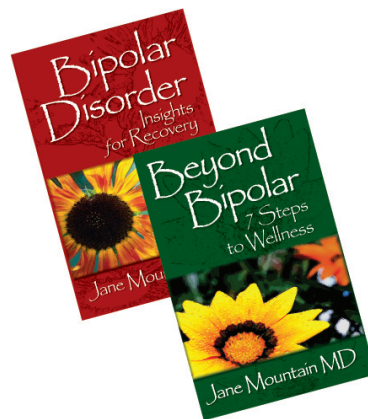
[To learn more about management, see chapter two of my book, Beyond Bipolar — 7 Steps to Wellness, available at www.BeyondBipolar.com, your local bookstore or on Amazon.com.]

10 Tips for Telling Your Story

1. First, listen to others. Ask them what they think of a person who has bipolar disorder. Their answer will help you know whether it is safe to tell your personal story without first educating your listener.
2. Tell your story to yourself first. As you do so, decide which parts you wish to share with others.
3. Begin by telling your story to your therapist, a trusted friend or relative.
4. Carefully chose the people to whom you tell your story. You can always add others to your list, but once you have told your story indiscriminately, you can't take that decision back.
5. Tell your story one paragraph at a time. Going too fast for others may make it difficult for them to be supportive, especially if they don't, at first, know how to help.
6. Tell your story in a safe place where you can be assured of the level of confidence and privacy you require.
7. Look for healing in the telling of your story. If you tell your story over and over without seeing different points of view, you will become discouraged. As you tell your story, look for one positive addition each time you tell it. Instead of, "I am so-o-o depressed," try, "I am so depressed, but now I am beginning to understand what depression means."

8. Tell about the wellness side of your coin as well as the illness side. "I'm succeeding out of the hospital even though that time was difficult for me."
9. When others tell your story, make sure they include your strengths rather than dwelling on your weaknesses.
10. Remember, your story isn't finished yet. You may have a painful illness story at the moment, but in the future your wellness story will be the most compelling part of your experience.

For More About Management and The Steps to Wellness—



Find them both at www.BeyondBipolar.com, Amazon.com, or at your local bookstore.

Recovery is the process of seeking mental wellness in the context of experiencing bipolar disorder.