Navigating the Space Between Brilliance and Madness

A Reader & Roadmap of Bipolar Worlds

assembled by The Icarus Project
Welcome To The Icarus Project www.theicarusproject.net

This book emerged out of our community-based website, www.theicarusproject.net, which has been helping a brilliant and disparate group of folks talk about “bipolar disorder” and related madness in ways that make sense to us, the people struggling with our own mental health, and help us live better lives rather than backing us into corners. This collection of writing, now in its tenth printing, began as a way of bringing these conversations onto the page and into the hands of people who might not spend time on the Internet. It has evolved to be a set of alternative roadmaps for people like us who are trying to take care of ourselves and live out our dreams.

When The Icarus Project began in September 2002 we were strangers who were brought together because we share a similarly inspiring and destructive emotional makeup that seems to infuse us with an intense passion for life and an insatiable need to communicate. We shared a vision of being “bipolar” that differs radically from the narrow model put forth by the medical establishment, and wanted to create a space for people like us to articulate the way we understand ourselves, our “disorder,” and our place in the world. We were inspired by the parallels between our own trajectories through madness and the archetypal journey of Icarus, a character from Greek mythology. (For more recent updates on our evolution, turn to the postscript on p. 82.)

Learning To Use Our Wings

As the ancient Greek myth is told, the young boy Icarus and his inventor father Daedalus were imprisoned in a maze on an island and trying to escape. Daedalus was crafty and made them both pairs of wings built carefully out of wax and feathers, but warned Icarus not to fly too close to the sun or his beautiful wings would fall to pieces. Icarus, being young and foolish, was so intoxicated with his new ability to fly that he soared too high, the wings melted and burned, and he fell into the ocean and drowned. For countless generations, the story of Icarus’ wings has served to remind us that sometimes the most incredible of gifts can also be the most dangerous. With our double-edged blessings we have the ability to fly to places of great vision and creativity, but like the mythical boy Icarus, we also have the potential to fly dangerously close to the sun—into realms of delusion and psychosis—and crash in a blaze of fire and confusion. At our heights we may find ourselves capable of creating music, art, words, and inventions which touch people’s souls and shape the course of history. At our depths we may end up alienated and incarcerated in psychiatric institutions, or dead by our own hands. Despite these risks, we are members of a group that has been misunderstood and persecuted throughout history, but has also been responsible for some of its most brilliant creations. And we are proud.

Our Vision

The Icarus Project envisions a new culture and language that resonates with our actual experiences of ‘mental illness’ rather than trying to fit our lives into a conventional framework. We believe we have a dangerous gift to be cultivated and taken care of, rather than a disease or disorder to be “cured” or “eliminated.” By joining together as individuals and as a community, the intertwined threads of madness and creativity can inspire hope and transformation in a repressed and damaged world. Our participation in The Icarus Project helps us overcome alienation and tap into the true potential that lies between brilliance and madness.

The Icarus Project brings this vision to reality through an Icarus organizing collective and a grassroots network of autonomous local support groups. The Icarus organizing collective supports the Icarus vision and nourishes local groups by: facilitating a website community, distributing publications, educating the public, offering tools, sharing skills, creating art, engaging in advocacy, enhancing community capacities, and providing inspiration and solidarity. The grassroots mental health network gathers people locally for listening, dialogue, mutual aid, activism, access to alternatives, and any creative ventures they can dream up. Consistent with the Icarus vision, local groups respect diversity and embrace harm reduction and self-determination around treatment decisions, including whether to take psychiatric drugs or not and whether to use diagnostic categories or not. Everyone who shares the Icarus vision is welcome to join, and can choose “Icarus Project” or any other name for the independent efforts that inspire them.
They tell us we are mentally ill. The two people putting together this reader you hold in your hands have been diagnosed with “Bipolar Disorder,” the most recent medical language for what was once known as Manic Depression. It is considered a disease of the mind. The statistics are that 6 million people in the United States have some form of the disorder, and that 1 out of 5 people left untreated will eventually kill themselves. But this “illness” is more than a bunch of statistics, or a set of symptoms. For those of us who live with this awkward label, the phenomenon it describes is something fluid and hard to pin down, yet none of us can escape its effects on our lives. We share common patterns and eerily common stories, some devastating and some inspiring—and so few of them have actually been mapped.

A simple place to start is here: we’re sensitive. We feel things hard and fast. We feel things quiet and deep. We feel things huge and open. We feel things heavy and slow. Sometimes we feel too much and crash to a place where we don’t feel anything at all; the walls of depression are so strong that they drown out sound and light like the cinderblocks of a psych ward cell locked up inside our souls. Sometimes we don’t feel anything at all because we’re so busy talking to angels or spies that we check out of what everyone else calls reality for a while. Sometimes we don’t remember anything at all because we stepped out of line, got stuck on too many damn tranquilizers, and are drooling on ourselves in the Quiet Room somewhere. Sometimes we archive every last nanosecond of the world’s most perfect afternoon in the infrastructure of our brains. Sometimes we feel nothing at all but pain. We’ve got thin skin. The world creeps under our fingernails and into our dreams.

And where do you go with that? Because the world’s pretty crazy itself these days. Do you pour it into crooked little paintings and big-voiced songs? Do you drive too fast and scream at people who get in your way? Do you hide with it in bed or rage with it at work? Do you smother it with a martini or a prescription for Prozac? Do you wear it in a smile like an electric sunset or in a blank stare like a broken screen?

Do you turn for help to a doctor or a priest? To a witch or a Wal-Mart? What map do you follow?

In this little book we’ve assembled an atlas of maps, back and forth through the subconscious and consciousness, from hospital waiting rooms to collective house kitchens, from the desert to the supermarket. The pages we are giving to you chart some of the underground tunnels beneath the mainstream medical model of treatment, tunnels carved by brave and visionary people before us, and tunnels we’re helping to carve ourselves with our friends. They go beyond three dimensions. They are maps made up of ideas and stories and examples from many people’s lives. They are maps of our souls as well as the world outside. Some of these maps will help you to navigate through the existing architecture of the mental health establishment; some of them might help you figure out for yourself where you stand in relation to the larger ecosystem of the earth and the people who inhabit it.

We have drawn these maps from the members of The Icarus Project website, from letters and e-mails, and from our own lives. While we have tried to include a wide range of experience and a fascinating bunch of stories, please understand that this reader was compiled by two biased but good-hearted individuals, Sascha and Jacks, doing their best to gather together everything they wanted the world to know in the short span of two winter months. It is necessarily imperfect and intentionally subjective; we do not even want to pretend that we (or any of the “authorities,” for that matter) have any objective knowledge of what bipolar disorder is. We’re beginning by telling you a bit about what we know best: our own experiences with bipolar.
I always knew I was different; the world seemed to hit me so much harder and fill me so much fuller than anyone else I knew. Even as a little kid I was possessed by a need to write constantly, make tons of intricate drawings, and stay up all night reading or just thinking about how intoxicating and painful everything was. Slanted sunlight could make me dizzy with its beauty and witnessing unkindness made me feel physical pain. I was pretty sure I was “crazy” by the time I was 11, when the twisted black nights and the depressions came on, but I didn’t have any words for it or anyone to tell. When I was 14 I got interested in words, remember laying in bed one night, wide awake with the hallway light bulb buzzing under my skin as everyone else dreamed peacefully, wishing for some sleep after another exhausting few weeks of wild-eyed electricity and secret, hysterical sobbing. Nothing in particular had happened except that no one could understand all the rapture and rage in my head. I started wondering about this word I’d read: manic depression. It was used to describe some poet in an English book. It sounded drastic and terrifying and even though I didn’t really know what it was I had an irrational hunch that it might describe me. But of course I didn’t talk to anyone about it. I just laid awake for a long time.

5 years later I got diagnosed with bipolar disorder, the latest term for manic depression, in a Virginia psych ward. The day before the nurses had found me swinging from curtains, screaming, after cutting up my arms to make sure I was still capable of feeling anything. I wasn’t sure if I was real anymore; the depression seemed to saturate every inch of my soul. Three months before I’d ended up being a total wreck as much as she was a superhero. It was a relief to think that all of this misery was just felt a creeping shame. And I wanted so badly to believe what he said; he was my hope. A vague old impulse in the back of my head wanted to kick his ass, but mostly I hated myself so much at the time that I just laid awake for a long time.

Because the map they gave me was terrifying. It was something like this: You will take psychiatric medication for the rest of your life. You will need to see a doctor constantly and always be on the lookout for side-effects. We will test your blood and your kidneys and your liver function every 3 months. You must have health insurance. You will need to live in one place. You will describe your disorder to all your friends and family, and they will watch over you, and you must trust all of our authority over your own, because you are not trustworthy. You will go to bed at a reasonable hour and get 8 hours of sleep every night and if you don’t we will need to put you on more drugs. You should try to have a steady job, but you might not ever be able to, because this is a serious disability. And if you don’t follow these instructions you will be totally out of control and it will just get worse and worse. People like you are dangerous if left untreated. Don’t be one of the ones who has to be hospitalized over and over again. Trust me, I’ve read the studies and you haven’t.

Once my head cleared enough to think again, I didn’t trust the doctors further than I could throw them. It just seemed like they had no visceral knowledge of what I was experiencing. They could anatomize it with all the words they learned in books, the way you could anatomize the movement of bones and muscles that allows a bird to fly, but they had no idea what flight is all about.

But doctors were not very interested in these arguments. The research made it very clear that I was supposed to comply with treatment. As I gradually regained my ability to read (paradoxically made possible, I have absolutely no doubt, by their drugs), I started to investigate the literature around bipolar disorder myself, and the more I read the more it seemed to me that doctors were trained to dissect people’s lives into terms, classes, rules, cases, neurotransmitters, algorithms, atypical anti-psychotics, treatment-resistance, non-compliance… which seemed like a ridiculous approach to understanding a human being. And simply taking pink pills seemed like an incredibly reductive approach to healing a problematic personality, or whatever this was that I had. Yet as much as I resisted their words, they were all I could find, and over and over again these incredibly limited, awkward words seemed like the harshest blueprints to my soul. And they could be found in the public library or on the internet… I hated the idea but also wondered, secretly, if there was some universality there. Obviously, if these words in big books in the library seemed to clumsily get at the flight patterns underlying my existence, there had to be other people with similar patterns.
Until I found them I worked in silence on my own map, which began with getting out of Virginia and out of my depressing day program full of washed up middle-aged men who’d spent most of their adulthood cycling in and out of various hospitals and abandoning all hope. My doctors protested furiously that I was not ready for independent life, but as soon as I felt like I could drive a hundred miles and maintain an occasional façade of functionality I finagled a job training horses and living by myself in a one room cottage in rural New Jersey. Endless group therapy and institutionalized relapse-prevention did not equate to healing for me; what soothed me was slowly drinking warm glasses of tea early in the morning by an east-facing window, watching the sunrise over my tiny, quiet house, and walking through the perfect frozen air to a warm barn full of waking horses and sensible smells like mud and wood. I refused therapy but took my drugs and let the narrative of my history and that huge question, what went wrong, unwind around me during the hours I spent cleaning stalls and feeding animals.

By the time I met Sascha years later I didn’t talk much about being bipolar. I’d driven all my earthly possessions to California and gone off medication, struggling alone with the whole question of how to handle this fragile fire in my brain. My new friends had never seen me crazy, and I secretly hoped the whole thing had been a fluke. After the previous years moving from New Jersey to Greece to San Francisco, learning to paint and how to cook, never holding down that steady job or getting exactly the right amount of sleep, having weeks of brilliance and weeks of debilitating doubt, deciding to heal myself through food, or yoga, or mountains, all of this to the chagrin of various shrinks, who always insisted it was a dangerous idea for me to travel, or move, or take fewer drugs. I eventually abandoned them entirely. The map those doctors had drawn for me did a very effective job scaring me away from the whole mental health establishment and I had yet to meet anyone with flight patterns like mine who could give me a few clues.

And then Sascha published an article called “The Bipolar World” in the San Francisco Bay Guardian that I could relate to more than almost any piece of writing I’ve seen in my life. Once we met and started pouring out our life stories I realized that what I’d been trying to ignore, this way of being that gets labeled bipolar disorder, this framework of filters and illuminations through which I experience life, is actually more fundamental to how I exist in the world than I could ever have guessed. Because here was this stranger sitting on my bed and he could finish my sentences, could articulate the inner folds of my consciousness though we’d never even met because there was something so similar about the way our minds worked. And I was absolutely fascinated to find out what kind of maps he’d followed through his life.

We began The Icarus Project as a way of creating a space for people to share their trajectories through this under-charted world of blackness and brilliance and the million shades of gray that the medical establishment has no idea how to describe. We hoped it would help people feel less alone and begin to understand the layers of who they have been and who they can be. There are so many possibilities. Until I began this project, I was never sure I could get a handle on my sanity long enough to pull off one of the zillion visionary ideas in my head. In one of the ironies of this “illness,” I probably never would have decided to take on the enormous task of learning to build a website from scratch while painting constantly, taking 5 classes, planting a garden, studying Buddhism, paying rent, etc. etc., without the adamant optimism and unfathomable energy of an unmedicated mania. But I probably wouldn’t be here to continue the work if I hadn’t gone back on medicine to tame the suicidal agitation I crashed into a month later. Patching together all these strange territories, my moods and my history, my lithium and my politics, my rent and my art, has been so confusing and painful at times that I have wanted to crawl out of my skin and disappear completely. It has required so much imagination. But it has also been penetrated throughout with a peculiar beauty, like grass busting up out of the sidewalk, and unimagined moments of grace, like last Valentine’s Day, when I got an e-card from one of the Icarus Project folks. He called me a guardian angel. The doctors never charted moments like that on their maps.
The world inside my head sometimes feels like a carnivale sideshow trickster game — full of smoke and mirrors, warping and shaping history through various gradations of manic and depressive lenses.

When I’m insane I feel like I have powers to see right through the things around me. I can’t help noticing that the world is ending — but my mind screw ups the calculations and thinks that the world is ending RIGHT NOW. When I’m depressed the television seems like it’s broadcasting Live from All the Land as I’m trapped in the worst nightmare I can possibly dream up for eternity. When I’m really down it’s so easy for me to forget any good I’ve ever done and rewrite myself as a miserable pathetic fool and my life as a shameful tragedy that never should have happened. But when I’m up it seems like the entire universe is behind me, and not only have I worked out the perfect plans for the future of the world — I have the energy to carry them out... for the rest of the planets after that.

Unless nowsome me, right around the corner all my plans are destined to crumble and I’m going to find myself wandering alone in the streets with the broken pieces, wondering how on earth I’d ever had the imagination to dream them all up and the chutzpa to actually believe they might happen. It’s a strange universe I inhabit: my past is never fixed, it seems to bend with the force of the present. Even when my life is the most steady and my internal paradigm is swinging closest to center, all my experiences are still filtered by everything I’ve seen through these eyes, everything I’ve felt with this heart — and everything that, at some point, I believed to be real.

Because this territory in my internal universe is continually shifting, I’ve learned to look for patterns and rhythms in the chaos that I can use as guides when I can’t locate steady ground. So I make maps from my memories. I make my maps out of words and stories.

I keep a written journal, and anyone who knows me knows that my big black book goes with me everywhere. It lies at the edge of my mattress next to my head, every night, with an open pen nestled in its crevice, waiting for me to wake up and scribble down my dreams. My journal books are cut and paste patchworks layered with different pieces of my life: my own words interspersed between flyers from events, ticket stubs, photos of friends and loved ones, collages of torn apart and reworked advertisements, dried leaves, maps of towns and cities, newspaper and magazine clippings, postcards, and scribbled contact info and little drawings from the people I meet. My journals are multi-layered, epistemically and physically. Sometimes I write something that I can’t bear to look at because it’s too embarrassing or complicated. I’ll paste over it with a photo or a flyer and know I can go back and read it when I’m ready, whether it’s a week later or in three years when I reduce it to its haunting pages calling to me from the shelf.

Above my desk the big black journal is sitting next to another, held together with duct tape and sweat and train grime and ghastly glue. They document the last 9 years of my life — the years since I dropped out of college in case I made a mistake in leaving, like I’ve had trouble making sense of who I am when I’ve gone back to what I’m trying to figure out where I’ve been. I can trace my dreams and my waking hours back almost a decade and find deeper insight into myself with every passing year.

My journals are the maps of this crazy journey. They look like the rings of a tree in the history they tell by their appearance. The books I’ve kept as I was breaking down in psychosis are tattered shreds and barely held together, showing evidence of trauma the same way the inner rings of a tree from a year of trees will be darker and more charred. My handwriting changes between my mania and my depression — ecstatic sentences taking up enormous space and whole melancholy paragraphs carved in sketches in the margins. My dreams are always written down sloppily, in crude half-blown chicken scratch, nestled between the other entries, marking the space between days. When there are no dreams to mark the space, that leaves blank spaces; a reminder that I wasn’t paying attention to my dreams.

I remember that the tattoos on your arms are dark blue stories and your dreams hold the keys to the secret answers of the universe."

As a child, I could not sleep. I would wander the city streets, sometimes alone, sometimes with friends, searching for something I couldn’t quite define. The world seemed vast and endless, full of wonder and mystery. I pored over maps and guides, searching for clues to the secrets hidden within. I became obsessed with the idea of exploring new territories, of uncovering hidden treasures.

The last time I was putting my life back together after it had completely fallen apart I discovered the true power of my journals. When I’ve been knocked way off balance it’s much easier for me to forget who I am and buy into the idea that everything I’ve done with my life is or cared about in the end just makes me a criminal and a worthless deadbeat with no job skills or diploma that is destined to end up in prison or living on my poor ex’s couch forever. My thoughts become plagued with images of “-if only’s” and I wish desperately for another chance to go back and change my sorry fate. When I rediscovered my journals THIS TIME I realized I’d left so many notes for myself from all the other times I went through this and that I already knew myself better than anyone. "Just in case you forget—things were really bad back here but you pulled through like a champ—you’re gonna make it kid." and "don’t you ever forget what the sunset looks like from the open door of this barcar, don’t you ever ever ever forget how alive you are right now: it’s still all in you, remember?"

Reading my old journals feels like I’m traveling through time. I suddenly have the ability to revisit earlier lives — but through the eyes of someone older, who sees things from a wiser place. And although I’m obviously the one who wrote them, it’s amazing what a different person I feel like now. It’s so hard to believe that all those lives were lived by the same person, and that person is me. I wonder what would happen to those memories if I didn’t write them down — if all the ridiculous and dangerous things I’ve ever done, all the stupid and wonderful places I’ve ever been, and all the brilliant and revolutionary people I’ve ever known, weren’t documented for me to rediscover like buried treasure lessons in the future. I wonder if all those memories would eventually just dissolve, unneeded, like the tears to rain.

This is my history. This is how I know I’ve been alive and that I’m not just living with a bunch of somebody else’s memories that I watched on television or saw in a movie or read about in the paper. I take notes. And my notes become stories, my stories become lessons, and my lessons become incorporated into my own personal mythology that I carry around with me everywhere. This is what gives the crazy patterns of my life meaning. This is how I map the world.

I hope this book of ours inspires you to make maps of your own.
I WAS 18 years old the first time they locked me up in a psych ward. The police found me walking on the subway tracks in New York City, and I was convinced the world was about to end and I was being broadcast live on prime-time TV on all the channels. I hadn’t slept for months, and I thought there were microscopic transmitters under my skin that were making me itch and recording everything I was saying for some top-secret branch of the CIA. After I’d walked the tracks through three stations, the cops wrestled me to the ground, arrested me, and brought me to an underground jail cell and then to the emergency room of Bellevue psychiatric hospital, where they strapped me to a bed. Once they managed to track down my terrified mother, she signed some papers, a nurse shot me up with some hardcore antipsychotic drugs, and I woke up two weeks later in the “quiet room” of a public mental hospital upstate.

I’d spent the previous year as a freshman at a prestigious private college in Portland, Or. At some point in the spring, around finals time, I’d gotten sick and gone to the campus health clinic. The school nurse gave me a prescription for penicillin, and I had an allergic reaction to it and almost died. To counteract the effects of the antibiotic, the hospital gave me a hardcore steroid called Prednisone, which totally messed up my sleeping schedule. But somehow, instead of being tired, I managed to have an infinite amount of energy: I’d ride my bike really fast everywhere and do tons of sit-ups and push-ups after sleeping badly for two hours. Without realizing what was happening, I slipped into a perpetually manic state, talking a mile a minute and juggling a dozen projects that had nothing to do with my schoolwork. I seemed to be withdrawing from some drug I suddenly didn’t have access to anymore? I didn’t want to be going to be grappling with for the rest of my life and that I was going to require daily doses of all those medications to be able to function healthily in the outside world.

I didn’t realize it at the time, but I, like millions of other Americans, would spend years wrestling with the implications of that diagnosis. Manic depression kills tens of thousands of people, mostly young people, every year. Statistically, one out of every five people diagnosed with the disease eventually commits suicide. But I wasn’t convinced, to say the least, that gulping down a handful of pills every day would make me sane.

You have to understand this part of the story: I was raised by parents with pretty radical leftist politics who taught me to question everything and always be skeptical of big business and capitalism. I spent my teenage years growing up in a punk scene that glorified craziness and disrespect for authority. Also, from the time I was a little kid, everyone always said that I was very sensitive to the world around me and to the suffering of others, maybe too sensitive, and I just chalked it up to that. My worldview didn’t leave any room for the possibility that my instability and volatility might actually have something to do with biology.

When I was 24, I ended up back in the same program, out in the New York suburbs, that my mom had put me in as a teenager. I was miserable and lonely. The doctors weren’t quite sure what I had, so they diagnosed me with something called schizoaffective disorder. They gave me an antidepressant called Celexa and an atypical antipsychotic called Zyprexa. I was in group therapy every day. There was an organic farm to work on down the road from the halfway house, and after a couple weeks they let me volunteer there a few hours a day sowing seeds and potting plants in the greenhouse. Eventually I convinced them to let me live there, and I moved out of the halfway house and came for outpatient care just a couple of times a week.

It took a few months, but for the first time I could see that the drugs were actually working for me. It was more than the circumstances; it actually felt chemical. Slowly all the horrible noise and thoughts faded and I started to feel good again. I remember watching an early summer sunset over the fields at the farm and realizing I was happy for the first time in months and months. Once I moved onto the farm full time, I would come into the city on the weekends to work at the farmers market and hang out with my friends. As obvious as it was that the drugs were helping me, I really just saw them as a temporary solution. They made me gain a bunch of weight. I always had a hard time waking up in the morning. My mouth was always dry. They were relatively new drugs, and not even the doctors knew about the long-term side effects of taking them. Besides which, the whole idea just made me feel really uncomfortable. How would I talk to my friends about it? What if there were some global economic crisis and instead of running around with my crew torching banks and tearing up the concrete I was withdrawing from some drug I suddenly didn’t have access to anymore? I didn’t want to be dependent on the drugs of the Man.

The police picked me up wandering the streets of Los Angeles on New Year’s Day 2001. I’d been smashing church windows with my bare fists and running through traffic scaring the hell out of people screaming the lyrics to punk songs, convinced that the world had ended and I was the center of the universe. They locked me up in the psych unit of the L.A. County Jail, and that’s where I spent the next month, talking to the flickering fluorescent lightbulbs and waiting for my friends to come break me out.

I was quickly given the diagnosis of bipolar disorder again and loaded down with meds. “That’s so reductionistic, so typical of Western science to isolate everything into such simplistic bifurcated relationships,” I’d tell the overworked white-coated psychiatrist staring blankly from the other side of the tiny jail cell as I paced back and forth and he scribbled notes on a clipboard that said “Risperdal” in big letters at the top. “If anything I’m multi-polar; poly-polar I go to poles you’d called Depakote. They told my mom to get used to the idea that I had a serious mental disorder...
never even be able to dream up in your imaginationless science or with all those drugs you’re shooting me up with. You’re all a bunch of fools!” And so I paced my cell.

Finally after the month in jail, a couple of weeks in a Kaiser psych ward, and four months in a halfway house for people with severe psychiatric disabilities, I got it together enough to be able to move back into my old collective house in North Oakland. I was taking a mood-stabilizing drug called lithium and an antidepressant called Wellbutrin.

And that’s when I finally started doing the research I’d been putting off for so long. After a year of not being able to read, I started to pick up some books I’d collected about manic depression. And that’s when I really began the internal and external dialogue about my condition, when I began to put the puzzle together and to make sense of it all so it wasn’t just a bunch of isolated pieces that didn’t fit together. I started talking to friends really openly and using the column I had in a punk rock magazine as a forum to talk about madness and manic depression. And I started coming to terms with the paradox that, however much contempt I feel toward the pharmaceutical industry for making a profit from manic-depressive people’s misery and however much I aspire to be living outside the system, the drugs help keep me alive, and in the end I’m so thankful for them.

II.

The Aug. 19, 2002, issue of Time states that 2.3 million people in the United States suffer from bipolar disorder. Given the vast number of people BPD affects on a daily basis, I’m amazed by how few books there are on the subject. Considering that young folks are the most heavily affected part of the population, the lack of books written about them seems particularly striking.

The Time article states that the average age of onset for BPD has fallen in a single generation from the early 30s to the late teens. And while it’s unclear whether those stats have more to do with the current diagnostic procedures or some other societal variable, the fact is that BPD characteristically hits folks for the first time as teenagers.

It’s confusing enough being a teenager in a society that’s obviously so twisted and manic itself. Imagine being told to swallow that (a) you’re the one who’s sick, not the society; and (b) it’s the society’s medicine that is going to cure you. A hard sell for sure. It partly explains the high stats of psych-med noncompliance and high average of readmittance to hospitals long after initial diagnosis. So where are the books for teens?

When I was institutionalized as a teenager in the early 1990s, the book the doctors recommended to my mom was called A Brilliant Madness: Living with Manic Depressive Illness, by Patty Duke and Gloria Hochman. This was the standard reading at the time, the book that all the doctors recommended if a family member had been diagnosed with BPD. A movie star before my generation’s speed, with short chapters that draw the reader in and a racy love story thrown in for good measure. And although I felt like I could connect to it on some levels, I still found something lacking.

At the beginning of this past summer, it seemed my question was partly solved. A friend brought to my attention a new book titled Detour: My Bipolar Road Trip in 4-D by a young woman named Lizzie Simon who was definitely thinking along similar lines. Diagnosed bipolar when she was 17 and now a successful theater producer in New York City with the help of her daily dose of lithium, Simon decided to travel across the country and interview other “successful” people who were bipolar and write about her adventures along the way. I was excited that, at long last, there was finally a book written by a person about my age dealing with our affliction. It’s a quick read, definitely more my generation’s speed, with short chapters that draw the reader in and a racy love story thrown in for good measure. And although I felt like I could connect to it on some levels, I still found something lacking.

Both Jamison’s Unquiet Mind and Simon’s Detour begin by talking about how idyllic and wonderful the authors’ childhoods were. I think in both instances they’re trying to drive home the point that their problems really are genetic in origin, that bipolar disorder can strike in the nicest of homes. But honestly, I just had a hard time relating to their good fortune. While I found

published in 1995, in recent years it has become the book everyone reads about manic depression. Jamison is an interesting one: not only is she a psychiatrist but she’s also bipolar herself and has been through the suicidally depressed and delusionally manic mood swings like the most dramatic and tortured of us. She also has quite a flair for writing, with a poetic command of language that left me smiling and reading certain passages over and over again. I would venture to guess that not too many psychiatrists out there use great words like “mercurial,” “cauldronous,” and “glacially.” I found the book well thought-out and beautifully written.

Jamison has another, less well-known book called Touched with Fire: Manic Depressive Illness and the Artistic Temperament. While more academic and dense, the book attempts to draw out the connection between creative genius and bipolar disorder, using as examples such classic artists and writers as Virginia Woolf, T.S. Eliot, Hermann Hesse, Vincent van Gogh, and Jackson Pollock. I finished the book with the new understanding that I’m a part of a group of people that has been misunderstood and persecuted throughout history, but meanwhile has been responsible for some of the most brilliant of history’s creations. I found the book rewarding in its attempts to tackle difficult questions about the nature of lithium treatment and the price artists pay in deciding whether to take the drugs. And questions about what would happen if people like us were actually weeded out through future genetic technology.

Touching with Fire left me wondering what a book about the relationship between bipolar disorder and creativity would look like if it was a little less academic and if the examples used were more contemporary artists and musicians, people whom (less classically cultured) folks from my generation might have actually heard of and be able to relate to.

Eight years later, when I was pacing my cell in the L.A. County Jail and being given shots of Haldol to keep me from setting off the sprinkler system, the book the doctors recommended to my mom was An Unquiet Mind: A Memoir of Moods and Madness, by Dr. Kay Redfield Jamison. First
Simon's descriptions of teenage mania eerily similar to my own stories and felt a connection in her enthusiasm and her drive to reach out to others like herself, her lack of consciousness about her own economic privilege in relation to the rest of the world smacked of the naivete of someone who's never stepped outside of the bubble of her upper class.

I kept thinking: If I'm having a hard time relating to this and I grew up relatively upper-middle-class, what about all the kids who read my column and send me letters who come from really dysfunctional working-class families? Who can they look to for inspiration and support?

And I found myself asking still deeper questions that no one else around me seemed to be able to answer: How do these drugs I'm taking actually work? What effects are they having on my brain chemistry? What's actually going on up there as I swing back and forth between mania and depression? As a college dropout with no background in molecular biology, neurology, or anything close to it, I started working my way through *Essential Psychopharmacology: Neuroscientific Basis and Practical Applications*, by Stephen M. Stahl, which was recommended to me by my psychiatrist at Kaiser as the most clear and well-written psych-med textbook available.

Reading it, I felt strangely like one of the androids in the 1980s sci-fi movie Blade Runner, the one about the droids who are so smart they've found their own blueprints and have gone looking desperately for their creator to help them reprogram themselves for longer life just before their time is up. Here I was, 27 years old, grappling with the intense reality that I have a genetic mental disease that supposedly only gets worse with age, lying in bed at night studying these complex diagrams in a psychopharmacology textbook, very conscious of the fact that my brain was reading about itself, that I was reading my own blueprints.

In the end, what it comes down to for me is that I desperately feel the need to connect with other folks like myself so I can validate my experiences and not feel so damn alone in the world, so I can pass along the lessons I've learned to help make it easier for other people struggling like myself. By my nature and the way I was raised, I don't trust mainstream medicine or corporate culture, but the fact that I'm sitting here writing this essay right now is proof that their drugs are helping me. And I'm looking for others out there with similar experiences.

But I feel so alienated sometimes, even by the language I find coming out of my mouth or that I type out on the computer screen. Words like "disorder," "disease," and "dysfunction" just seem so hollow and crude. I feel like I'm speaking a foreign and clinical language that is useful for navigating my way though the current system, but doesn't translate into my own internal vocabulary, where things are so much more fluid and complex. Toward the end of *An Unquiet Mind*, Jamison points out that even the term "bipolar" seems to obscure and minimize the illness it is supposed to represent by presupposing a polarization between two states that aren't always so easily picked apart. But "bipolar" seems to be the word we're stuck with for the moment.

Our society still seems to be in the early stages of the dialogue where you're either "for" or "against" the mental health system. Like either you swallow the antidepressant ads on television as modern-day gospel and start giving your dog Prozac, or you're convinced we're living in a Brave New World and all the psych drugs are just part of a big conspiracy to keep us from being self-reliant and realizing our true potential. I think it's really about time we start carving some more of the middle ground with stories from outside the mainstream and creating a new language for ourselves that reflects all the complexity and brilliance that we hold inside.
Making Sense of Being Called Crazy in a Crazy World...

What is Normal?

Are we delusional and dysfunctional, or is it the culture we live in?

...The first time I was hospitalized, I asked a night duty nurse why I was there. Because you have a mania, she replied. How is my mania on insisting that the world is an irrational place any different from your mania on insisting that the world is rational? The nurse turned and walked off, probably to screw 'delusions of grandeur' on my record..." — B.F.

When your brain is the one breaking down, the idea of mental illness seems excruciatingly real.

When you start to ask the authorities questions like:

What are Mental Illnesses?

You tend to get answers like:

In general, they’re disorders of the brain, your body’s most important organ.

A mental illness is:
- a health condition, much like heart disease or diabetes
- no one’s fault — not the person is, nor the family is.

But it’s not that simple. There’s no blood test for mental illness. Diagnosis relies entirely on the subjective opinion of the physician. And The American Psychiatric Association has recently added new “disorders” like Compulsive Shopping Disorder and Oppositional Defiant Disorder to its list of illnesses. Are these really medical conditions like diabetes that should be treated with drugs, or are they outgrowths of a sick culture seeking quick fixes for unhappy housewives and easy ways to control kids who question authority?

When you ask some people:

What are mental illnesses?

You get answers like, “Mental illness” is a convenient label for behavior that disrupts the social order.

You get answers like: people who notice how screwed up the world is, or who perceive reality in radically different ways than “normal” folks, and then display “extreme” reactions, get labeled with a disease. What could render diapause, driving and Christian fundamentalism a form of pathology, depending on who’s making the diagnosis. Consider: a kid can’t sit still in class and wants to talk when he has an idea, instead of when he gets called on. Is the kid out of control and in need of Ritalin, or is it possible that school is actually incredibly regimented, unimaginative, and mind-numbing to the point that a child with an active, inquisitive brain might find it very difficult to pay attention? According to the DSM-IV, the official diagnostic manual of the American Psychiatric Association, a behavior “clinically significant” enough to be labeled a disorder must not be “an expectable and culturally sanctioned response to a particular event.” So if an average American responds to a given annoyance — the fact that people are starving in countries all over the world where farmers are being forced to grow coffee for America instead of food for their people — with an expectable and culturally sanctioned response, like turning on the television to avoid thinking about it, they are healthy. Whereas if I sob hysterically and talk to strangers about it and stay up all night trying to think of ways to change it, I might or not be someone who needs psychotherapy.
But you can’t stay up all night every night. The world is full of atrocities.
If you can’t filter some of them out you are going to explode.

How do you know if you have a problem?

There is no one answer

Except this: it depends who you’re asking.

The DSM-IV stresses a “marked impairment in occupational functioning.” When the World Bank was trying to find a way to gauge the cost of mental illness, they came up with the measurement days out of role. As in the number of days a person is unable to perform the role expected of them: 

- student
- worker
- factory worker
- full-time student

On one hand, this makes some sense. Everyone gets down, right? If you can keep your problems in your head you’re doing all right, but if they really get in the way of functioning where it counts — school or work — then it’s time to worry, right?

But what if you never wanted to perform one of these roles?

They will assure you and your family with statements like:

Mental illnesses are treatable. With proper treatment, many people with a mental illness get well and lead productive lives.

“Mental Health Seen As Ultimate Productivity Weapon
Rise of Mental Disorders Becoming Major Business Issue”

(Actual title of the keynote paper for World Mental Health Day 2000, sponsored by the World Mental Health Foundation)

According to the author of this study, Bill Wilhelm, we are seeing “a deepening dependence of global corporations on the minds rather than the backs and muscles of those who work for them. Mental capacity will do the ‘heavy lifting’ in the information economy. The mental capacity to do productive work is under unprecedented attack from a complicated network of social, economic, biological and genetic forces. An ‘impeccable maze’ as Harvard researchers have called it. The stage is thus set for a global business agenda on mental health starting with the proposition that mental health is an important business productivity weapon in an intensely competitive data-based world economy.”

Do you want to regain your mental capacity so you can do some ‘heavy lifting’ or so you can live out the role you’ve chosen for yourself as fully as possible? How do you trust the people who are supposed to help you when they’re part of this same system?

“Whatever definition of normal is used, the fact is that this type of behavior — what is called normal — is in itself one of the most dangerous forms of behavior ever seen on Earth. The obedience, the consumption, the unquestioning approach, the violence...” — David Carr

Doctors help a lot of people.

Medications help a lot of people.

They do have lives.

We live in an imperfect world. Do what you have to do to survive.

Think for yourself.

Who is telling your doctor what to think?

Timothy Kiley (aka Madelender to Cains Project files) published a few recent observations on the link between the psychiatric profession and the pharmaceutical industry in a recent communique from Cains magazine:

I remember being shocked by the amount of pharmaceutical advertisement in my psychiatrist’s office. Posters, calendars, and even a clock all proudly displayed the names of products like Ritalin, Paxil, and Zyprexa. On the office table a stack of magazines published by drug companies were filled with full color glossy advertisements of drugs. It occurred to me that this advertisement was not directed at me, the patient, but at my doctor.

The pharmaceutical industry spends over 15 billion dollars annually on advertising, and roughly a quarter of their total profits come from the sale of psychiatric medication, more than any other illness or ailment (Cassas Aires, 5/02). The American Psychiatric Association receives much of its funding, including for research, from pharmaceutical companies. Essentially, we have an extremely lucrative industry exerting huge financial influence over the medical field, particularly psychiatry, an area ripe for profit due to the fact that it’s not hamstrung by the same expectations of intellectual proof as other areas of medicine.

At the same time, the state acted as an active entity in the creation and enforcement of regulations that allowed considerable latitude for the definition of disease and illness. Illnesses like schizophrenia, depression, and anxiety have been regrouped under large umbrella terms with medication as their underlying force.

Think for yourself.

Do what you have to do to survive.
A really sad story about my dead friend who was manic-depressive like me

by sascha

I was at my house in Oakland when the phone call came. A mutual friend in the Mid-West who heard from her friend in Oregon about a girl back on the East Coast who jumped off a bridge. She thought it might just be a rumor. I didn’t believe it and that’s what I said: “Naw man, I just talked to Sera a week ago -- she was going traveling and had a ticket to Europe in February. She said she had been a little down but she didn’t sound so bad. She always goes through her waves of depression like the rest of us.” But my heart was beating fast and my fingers were starting to shake.

“It’s true man, she’s dead. I’m sorry to have to be the one to tell you. Things have been really strange around here the last couple days.” That was Spam in West Philadelphia. I had called his house after talking to Sera’s voicemail.

“Everyone around here is freaking out. You two were really close, huh? I’m really sorry.” Shock. Disbelief. As the tears started falling down my face I could suddenly feel this unfamiliar emotion rising up inside of me the same way that you can sometimes feel unfamiliar muscles in your body the day after doing a new exercise. And it hurt. It really hurt.

Sera and I had a lot in common. We were both hopeless romantics and suffered from crazy wanderlust. We waxed poetic over freight trains and the call of the open road. Sera and I had ended up hitchhiking all the way across the country to go to those historic protests against the World Trade Organization in Seattle and we had mad adventures all along the way. We were never satisfied with our work -- no matter how much we were doing. We both threw ourselves into crazy situations just to feel alive -- just to feel things really intensely. We were both running from the ghosts of our childhoods and found our peace out on the open road -- in the excitement of the new, the stories of strangers, and in the struggle for justice.

We were also both manic depressive.

One of our big conflicts while we were traveling was that she was always trying to get me to stop taking my psych drugs. She said that they slowed me down. The whole idea of them just made her uncomfortable. Sera didn’t believe in a life without extremes and she didn’t want her experiences mediated by some drug made by The Man. They just want you to give up on everything you care about. They want you to give up on feeling and on passion and on your own idiosyncratic experience. They want you to give up on having a body that has a life of its own outside of the prison of the brain.

And doesn’t everybody have mood swings? At what point does it become something that gets the label “disease”? At what point, if any, does it make sense to start taking the drugs? So many of my friends could probably be diagnosed as some form of “crazy” by mainstream psychiatrists because a lot of mainstream psychiatrists are just like pawns of the big drug companies (which are in fact very evil and just want to dole out as much product as they can and get you hooked so you’ll always be coming back for the fix.) As a subculture we don’t usually take the whole “crazy” thing too seriously. It’s a word that me and my people throw around with ease.

But the reality is that a lot of us struggle with our own madness and we don’t always find ways of coping that work. There is a point where you have to draw the line and come to some kind of conclusion about the nature of your problems. To give you an example from my own life:

This time last year I was sitting in a tiny cell in the psych unit of Los Angeles County Jail convinced that the world as we knew it had just ended and we were all living on in dreamtime and that everyone I saw was just a reflection of me so it didn’t matter what I did. In short, by all measurements, I was totally stark raving loony toons.

What happened wasn’t inevitable. I’d stopped taking my psych drugs a few month earlier because it seemed obvious that I didn’t need them anymore and I was just being my usual hectic self: working on too many projects, leaving piles of paper everywhere, riding around on my bike and being super busy.

Then at some point things began to get a little out of control. I stopped sleeping well at night because my head was constantly bursting with amazing ideas. My thoughts started to get more desperate. Everything started to seem very relevant. I mean everything. My mind suddenly had the power to take any two things and draw connections between them. The projects I was working on suddenly seemed very very important, even urgent. I felt like I had discovered THE secret that was going to bring everyone together -- unite everyone in the world against the global power structure. I was reading a book called Revolutionary Suicide by Huey P. Newton and books about COINTELPRO, the program the FBI used to destabilize activist groups in the ’70’s. I started getting paranoid. I started to have the very desconcerting feeling that I was about to die, that there were important people that wanted me dead.

I stopped hanging out with anyone who knew me well and I started hanging out with people who had just met me and didn’t find it so disturbing that I had slipped totally off my rocker. I started walking up to total strangers on the street and talking to them and have amazing conversations. I’d walk to the community garden down the street and just hang with the plants. I could feel every leaf as if they were every part of me. Each plant had an incredibly different personality and I would spend hours just listening to them talk to me. It was so incredible. Meanwhile, I began to get more and more estranged from my community. My housemates were scared of me. Everyone was talking about me behind my back, but no one had the courage to actually confront me.

As for so many of us, psych drugs symbolized defeat in Sera’s eyes. Like having to spend your last money on a greyhound after getting kicked out of the trainyard and the highway. But worse because it means so much more than popping a couple pills: taking psych meds seems to mean adopting a completely different lifestyle. It means having health insurance so it means having a job so it means staying in one place so it means being stable, a worker bee. The pills are a constant reminder that you’re dependent on the system that you hate to keep you alive and healthy -- you’re tied right into insurance so it means having a job so it means staying in one place so it means being stable, a worker bee. The pills are a constant reminder that you’re dependent on the system that you hate to keep you alive and healthy -- you’re tied right into insurance so it means having a job so it means staying in one place so it means being stable, a worker bee. The pills are a constant reminder that you’re dependent on the system that you hate to keep you alive and healthy -- you’re tied right into insurance so it means having a job so it means staying in one place so it means being stable, a worker bee.

In short, by all measurements, I was totally stark raving loony toons. Meanwhile, I began to get more and more estranged from my community. My housemates were scared of me. Everyone was talking about me behind my back, but no one had the courage to actually confront me.

At some point my mom came out to visit from New York and in her typical fashion, proceeded to organize a bunch of my friends together to take some direct action. One night they sat me down and pleaded with me to start taking my drugs again. I was furious.

Were they fucking blind? Hadn’t they been reading the news? Didn’t they realize that the pharmaceutical companies and the agro-chemical companies had merged into the LIFE SCIENCE INDUSTRY and these people wanted nothing less than enslavement of the human race and control of the entire planet? These were the same people who were trying to genetically engineer the world’s crops to be dependent on their herbicides, the same ones who created the technology that can make seed crops reproduce sterile. It’s so American to think that you can fix everything with a pill or feed people with chemicals. Hadn’t they read Huxley’s Brave New World? How could they not see what was going on when it was so obviously right in front of their eyes? You want me to trust these people’s medicine? You gotta be kidding me. These people peddle pesticides to farmers in the developing world and graft human ears to lab mice. They are evil motherfuckers. I’m not going to put those drugs in my body -- they’re just going to kill the parts of my brain that are working so well! You just want me to be a robot like the rest of you. Fuck that shit and fuck all of you!

And so off to Los Angeles I went, to get myself locked up in jail. I’ve been told that it’s very hard to argue with someone who is not only manic and delusional but not really that far off the mark. For brevity’s sake I’ll spare all the details, but let me just say that I’m very lucky I didn’t end up with an LAPD bullet in my chest.

They say that most manic-depressives go off their drugs a bunch of times before they either kill themselves or realize that they need them. That’s a hard one to hear, and I still don’t completely believe it, but mania is alluring for sure. They say
that we get addicted to the intensity like a drug.

But of course the problem with the intensity is that it’s like a pendulum swing -- if you swing too far over to one side, you’re inevitably going to swing back over in the other direction. I can plot the last eight years of my life on a graph and it would look like a big sine wave. Huge peaks and dips. And the ups and downs have been responsible for everything cool I’ve ever done in my life. But the downs are miserable.

I can’t really get mad at Sera. She wasn’t in control of herself when she jumped off that bridge. She just wanted the pain to end. She just felt so uncomfortable in her own skin that she couldn’t take it anymore. Suicide is not a malicious act. I spent four months of last year totally suicidal and psychotic, stuck in a miserable halfway house for people with severe psychiatric disabilities, far away from all my friends, my head eating itself alive with self-hatred and despair. Manic-depression is a sickness, a disease. But it’s more complicated because it always seems like it’s the most brilliant and talented people like Sera who are cursed with it. It’s a blessing and a curse -- an imbalance of chemicals in their brains that torments them but lets them see and feel things other people can’t, allows them to create art and music and words that grab people by the heart and soul -- allows them to kiss the sky and come back down to tell the tale.

In the interests of sticking around the planet for a while, I’m learning new dances with the enemy. At least for now I’ve made my choice to take the drugs and deal with all the sacrifices that go along with that choice: not being able to stay up all night, slowing down, staying in one place, holding down a job for more than a couple months at a time, going to a bunch of therapy, all things I’ve always been so scared of. But I really want to live and I really want to grapple with my demons and I know it’s going to take a long time. I was really worried the drugs were going to turn me into a zombie, but trust me: I feel strong emotions everyday, I need something to keep that shit in check. This isn’t exactly the path I pictured myself walking down, but here I am, walking it.

And Sera’s not. It’s so hard to believe she’s dead. Sera had such wide open traveler eyes. I can’t help but remember little things like how when we were on the road we’d wake up in the morning and tell each other our dreams. She taught me this word once in Armenian: yavroos, which translated to something like “one who knows your soul.” I loved that woman something real. She bared her soul to me. She still feels so alive. And there’s some paradox about the whole thing: I think it’s really because she really was more alive than most of us. She felt things more, she took more risks, she refused to play by society’s rules, she lived with an intensity that most people only ever dream of -- she lived her life like someone who always felt like she didn’t have enough time. She lived fast and died young just like she figured she would. She wrote hundreds of pages that are inevitably going to be published and change a whole lot of people’s lives. She’s leaving her mark for sure.

But it’s really sad and I can’t stop thinking of that ancient Greek myth of Icarus and his wings of wax. In the old story, Icarus’ father Daedalus builds a pair of wings out of wax and feathers for his son so that they can escape from the island they’ve been imprisoned on. Despite all his father’s warnings, Icarus flies too close to the sun, melts his beautiful wings, and falls into the ocean to his death. The moral of the story being that Icarus was fortunate enough to have been given wings, but he wasn’t patient enough to learn how to stay balanced -- he couldn’t see anything but soaring as high as he could, so he ended up in the sea.

I wanted to get old with Sera Bilizikian still in my life. I just figured that that’s the way it would be. I just want her back now and it’s not going to happen. Sera had a beautiful pair of wings that carried her to faraway places and on amazing journeys. She burned bright in her short twenty-three years, did a lot of good for the world while she was here, and will be missed by many many people. I hope that as a community we can learn the lessons from this horrible tragedy, and that it inspires us to learn how to understand and take better care of each other.

Mania, Depression, and the Territory Between

In an attempt to find language that can map the extremes of our landscapes, we’ve drawn the following paradigm from letters we’ve received and the words people have posted on The Icarus Project website, interpersed with our own commentary (in italics).

One of the first things we’ve noticed is that there seems to be a universal wave function underlying bipolar experience. Like a pendulum, our moods and subsequently the course of our lives, will swing down as far as they swing up, and the two extremes can’t seem to interact without each other, unless the pendulum swings to equilibrium closer to the center.

“It is as if my thoughts have sailed away. I can see them in the distance, but I can’t access them. I feel like I’ve experienced an amazing dream where everything comes together and fits in gorgeous geometrical patterns. And now, my reality crowds around me like stale smoke. I feel cowardly, inept, and worthless.” -emiko

Though bipolar affects an astonishingly wide range of people, it seems to give many of us the feeling that we are caught in different waves at different times. The people might look normal.

“First of all, I live about the most normal life imaginable. I have a husband, I teach school. I have three kids, I go to their ballgames. I go to Church. Even though my life appears to be normal to the person who hardly knows me, I really wonder, ‘Can someone with BP ever truly be normal?’ I can sit in a meeting with all the teachers and ten minutes before they come up with the plan, I have already planned and executed everything in my mind. Sometimes I feel like I am going to have a meltdown yet no one around me even knows. With the help of medication, I am maintaining a ‘look’ of normalcy. Yet, I worry how long it will actually last this time. Do non-BP people even have the remotest idea of the magnitude with which we feel emotion? Is this the curse or the blessing of this disorder?” -bpbear
Bipolar seems to mark all of us with an intense sensitivity to the world we live in. So often it becomes too much to handle.

“I remember sitting in a thrift store parking lot, at night in winter Cleveland, staring at the parking lights just thinking of the oil, the people who got the oil, the people who sell the oil, the people who use the oil, and just how insane it all was. It felt like I was the only one who knew that this was all going to have to end, that there wasn’t enough and we weren’t conserving it. This pretty much drove me crazy. I went from science to self-discovery in an attempt to make sense of it all when I was about 16, started smoking, tripping, all that. I would like to say that it has helped, helped me discover the realm of “more than me” and basically sparked the spiritual side of my life. The only problem is addiction. I’ve been addicted ever since. I think that it’s been my way of medicating the “craziness” and feeling of this world, both good and bad.” -ilove

Part of what’s so distressing about being manic-depressive is that you feel like you’re given access, at times, to brilliant and seemingly secret visions of the world—and when they are snatched away without warning it’s so hard to stop chasing after them.

“At times I can find so much meaning in every tiny little thing around that most “normal” people might never throughout their entire life think about twice. Like the flow of a small stream of water after a misty rain or even that first breath of fresh air you inhale after a day or two of not leaving the house because of a manic or depressed episode. At the times in my life when it seems everything is right, when I can find a significance in life, when I’m at peace... those times are what the depression of bipolar disorder destroys in an instant when it hits. Creating a cul-de-sac at almost every road you turn down. Like an endless vicious cycle of deceit played out on another level of thought. Like a chess game that you’ve mastered through brilliant strategy, and you’re about to capture the queen with a silent pawn and in that last pouncing move the board flips and you start over again. Like a Sisyphus cycle of damnation, endlessly rolling that rock to the top only to watch it tumble.” -Jereme

Sometimes you build a universe in your mind that is like an intricate house of cards, and though you think it’s impenetrable, only a breath or the flick of a fingertip can make it all fall down around you. The pendulum never remains at its highest point; it swings from ecstasy and revelation to suicidal depression according to its own laws of physics.

“I’d spent the first part of that fall flying through uncharted regions of human understanding, convinced that the secret to world peace was the simple fact that the carbon in our bodies was born in the supernovas of huge stars, so we were all obviously the same. This made me ecstatically happy. This was by far the most compelling piece of information on the planet and I was going to share it with every high school student in America. When I failed a biology test, however, the infrastructure of the universe seemed to fall apart. Within a few weeks I was calling Al at the suicide hotline to mutter about how I should obviously either stop existing or move to a beach in Hawaii. All that crap about the stars seemed to be laughing at me.” -a

They say that the cycle begins with mania.
The next day my wife somehow wrangled me to the hospital where I was seen by my professors who were covertly training me for my summer anthropology research abroad. I also thought I had identified a new way of communicating, something animalistic and non-verbal, that was generally subconscious but noticeable through very intimate observations. My professors were monitoring my every move through cameras and microphones. I was being recorded and broadcast both to audiences of random anybody and to secret government agencies—video as well as audio. I had great ideas, like after the revolution. My housemates, my girlfriend, and everyone else around in the community were getting really sick of me and telling me to chill out. I had great ideas, they said, but no one was going to listen if I was talking so fast. “-scatter

“I left my house at 2 am and went to the Tenderloin hunting for prostitutes, when I couldn’t find any I started looking for people to talk to about my theory about the transformation of the old world into a new world, a world where men and women are perfect “angel creatures.” On my walk home I found a homeless man sleeping on the steps of a church and shook him awake and gave him my whole wallet with over $200 in it, because—of course, being the new Messiah, I would have no need for money, ID and credit cards any more. It all seemed so logical. The next day my wife somehow dragged me to the hospital where (as I remember it) I underwent a sort of metaphorical crucifixion. After knocking over some equipment I was tackled by about five guys, shot up with Haldol, and strapped onto the gurney. From there I embarked on this indescribable mystical journey I like to think was probably pretty similar to what Muhammad went through. My wife doesn’t quite remember it that way though... I was just mumbling and nuts.”—m.l.

Sometimes our dreams become elaborate nightmares filled with conspiracies and secret languages. When we wake up months later we sometimes still find scraps of truth in the psychotic rubble.

We become obsessed with a million projects that are going to change or explain the world and suddenly find ourselves fearless, convinced of our own importance, and unafraid to do things like reach out to famous people we would never have contacted if we had actually been getting enough sleep.

“In the weeks leading up to my psychotic break I was working on an economic tract that was essentially going to re-invent Marxism for the digital age. I had actually been corresponding with John Kenneth Galbraith of all people and he had been writing back. I laugh now when I think of it. I wonder what he made of all of my sprawling pages and diagrams...” —anon.

At some point our insights and theories become the worlds we inhabit, and we position ourselves in the center as messianic figures, mystics, or simply the only person who really knows... Everything we encounter fits into our own personal mythologies, which become written in the symbolic language that used to belong to our dreams but now bleeds over into our waking lives.

Stopped sleeping much. Waking up early all the time. Had vivid thoughts again. Then one day started seeing illuminated patterns rising up out of the dirt. Found myself hiking through canyons that were suddenly so lucidly cut out of the sky that their immensity became comprehensible and I could see all of them at once. Could see in the rocks and feel weight in the air. Somehow climbed 3000 feet in 3 miles without feeling like I’d gone anywhere at all. Bounding up switchbacks and into areas of the moon that the air. We become obsessed with a million projects that are going to change or explain the world and suddenly find ourselves fearless, convinced of our own importance, and unafraid to do things like reach out to famous people we would never have contacted if we had actually been getting enough sleep.

“We become obsessed with a million projects that are going to change or explain the world and suddenly find ourselves fearless, convinced of our own importance, and unafraid to do things like reach out to famous people we would never have contacted if we had actually been getting enough sleep."

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At some point our insights and theories become the worlds we inhabit, and we position ourselves in the center as messianic figures, mystics, or simply the only person who really knows... Everything we encounter fits into our own personal mythologies, which become written in the symbolic language that used to belong to our dreams but now bleeds over into our waking lives.

“Stopped sleeping much. Waking up early all the time. Had vivid thoughts again. Then one day started seeing illuminated patterns rising up out of the dirt. Found myself hiking through canyons that were suddenly so lucidly cut out of the sky that their immensity became comprehensible and I could see all of them at once. Could see in the rocks and feel weight in the air. Somehow climbed 3000 feet in 3 miles without feeling like I’d gone anywhere at all. Bounding up switchbacks and into areas of the moon that no one else has access to. At the height of our manias it might seem like we have a direct line to God or simply to the meaning of the universe; we pass through states of intense euphoria and spiritual enlightenment on our way to the Truth. Sometimes it seems like the world is full of nothing but hypocrisy and everyone we love is turning on us, and we become furious, destructive, and full of rage. Sometimes it becomes abundantly clear that the government and/or our personal demons are coming to get us and we are haunted by paranoid certainty of grand conspiracies and imminent apocalypse. One of the biggest challenges for people like us is attempting to make sense afterwards of the visions we have during our manias. In our society it seems our revelations are considered psychosis if we choose to believe there might be any truth in them.

The Beginning of the Cycle. It is hard to know where to draw the line between having boundless energy, seeing meaning everywhere, and behavior that is symptomatic of a problem: budding mania.

“At some point the insights and theories evolving in our brains become so all-consuming that we feel an urgent need to communicate them to everyone... We talk too much and become irritated when the people around us can’t keep up. We find ourselves alienating lovers and being talked about by friends and family. In the weeks leading up to my psychotic break I was working on an economic tract that was essentially going to re-invent Marxism for the digital age. I had actually been corresponding with John Kenneth Galbraith of all people and he had been writing back. I laugh now when I think of it. I wonder what he made of all of my sprawling pages and diagrams...” —anon.

Sometimes our dreams become elaborate nightmares filled with conspiracies and secret languages. When we wake up months later we sometimes still find scraps of truth in the psychotic rubble.

“I ended up thinking that nanobots had been implanted into me during the surgery, and that my professors were covertly training me for my summer anthropology research abroad. I also thought I had identified a new way of communicating, something animalistic and non-verbal, that was generally subconscious but noticeable through very intimate observations. When I describe it now, I still feel that this mode of communication exists, but I was definitely reading into people’s utterances too much, deciphering subconscious admissions and clues of desire in everybody’s statements. Things took on an overtly sexual set of qualities for me. I ended up in a mental ward—it was horrendous, although not as bad as before. A positive result was that I was diagnosed as manic depressive.”

When we enter the world of hallucinations and delusions we are told we are having a psychotic break with reality and we are routinely hospitalized, diagnosed with a disease, and drugged. And this may save our lives. But many of us touch on similar places when we’re in those frantic states, and it’s hard not to wonder if the parallel perceptions we sometimes have are due to more than just altered brain chemistry. Could they actually be openings onto something real, something so powerful it tips our fragile brains over the edge? Are we getting a glimpse of systems underlying society and patterns underlying experience that most people never have a chance to see?

“I started getting really short with my friends, cutting them off in mid-sentence because I knew how important it was that I get my thoughts out before it was too late. I knew that I wouldn’t live to see the day, but I wanted to make sure I did as much as I could before the government got me. I needed to leave behind instructions for everyone so they’d know what to do without me around. I’d wake up in the morning from a couple hours of restless sleep and pour out pages and pages of ideas for what life should look like after the revolution. My housemates, my girlfriend, and everyone else around in the community was getting really sick of me and telling me to chill out. I had great ideas, they said, but no one was going to listen if I was talking so fast.”—scatter
So when I read about this stuff in your article, that you’d had very similar delusions and the like, it really got me thinking—what brought our brains, in different times, different genders, with different backgrounds and upbringing—what brought our brains into this intensely parallel thinking? Are those things somehow universal? Are there any universals when it comes to mental health breakdowns?”—jennifer audacity

“Depression feels like shrinkage of thought and perspective. There’s no comfort of Big Picture. #1 dilemma becomes how to get through the day. It just seems like the most effective (though totally temporary) way to smother all the pain and how hard it was to live in those places. I felt stuck or raw and anxious, or to numb myself or blind myself with euphoria to all the hypocrisy that seemed to be eating up my brain. To feel satisfied with the people who hated myself for doing it. I’ve gone out and had 10 shots of tequila a few months after getting out of the psych ward, while I never used to watch TV (even before my mania). Now I find myself channel surfing. In my previous life, I loved cyborgs and donna haraway. Now I can’t muster the interest for any social theory. I don’t know who I am anymore. It feels like my soul has abandoned me. I miss my passion and last for life. I miss my curiosity. And I miss my trust in myself.”—emiko

Mixed states really trigger those nasty, frenzied, psychotic episodes - that incomprehensible rant at the checker in Safeway who didn’t pack your grocery bag “just right,” the gasoline-fueled game of speeding through a 25mph school zone at 90 mph and everybody “better get outta my way” attitude, that aggressive, light-picking, arrest-inducing confrontation with the cop drinking his latte at Starbucks. Mixed states - amped up, energized, detached, anti-social, and very, very dark. PS - Some people get “86’d” or banned from bars and taverns. In my wrecked out, suburban, pseudo-soccer mom life, I’ve been banned from my neighborhood grocery store, the drycleaner and post office (is that legal?). And I “look” so “normal.”--anon

Often these mixed states mark the disorienting, desperate passage from the upper world to the under world. We may start witnessing the hideous shattering of all the intricate dreams we were flying—while knowing we are utterly powerless to do anything to save them. We want so badly to keep up the pace we were managing before, but our thoughts are fragmenting and it’s becoming harder and harder to explain anything to anyone. Nasty thoughts descend like frantic certainties: you can’t possibly follow through on what you started, you are a failure, you are letting everyone down, you are crazy, you are doing it again. Mixed states can become very dangerous. We may lack the focus to cook ourselves dinner, but we have enough energy to jump off a bridge.

“I have all this anxious awful electricity and I can’t sit still. I constantly feel like I should be doing something, but it’s totally impossible to focus and I start feeling like a failed superhero. I walk around and see the sky full of birds and wonder why they all look like some kind of detached dreamworld, not real, not feeling beautiful at all, feeling like some joke of a real experience. I start feeling a deep sense of alienation in a wired, red-eyed, called out of sync. #2 enemy is the long stretches of time when I cannot breathe, in which it seems like the world is not even breathing. I just want to run away and break things. It seems more and more impossible to talk to anyone because my own hysterical accelerating soundtrack is just too overwhelming. It starts to seem more and more reasonable that I would cause everyone so much less trouble if I just died.”--j

In some ways the depressions that come feel like death. The world outside us is no different than it was a few days, weeks, or months ago, but we are suddenly totally unable to participate in it.

“There is a real life, and there is living death. disinterest and disgust and nothingness. I feel it in my chest. It breaks my heart. It feels like breathlessness. being pulled from the shore... again and again and again. and everywhere I hear of someone else, upon this, that breaks my heart even more, and joy becomes obsolete within moments. I am so sick of interacting with other human beings. as soon as I enter a conversation, I am frantically searching for a way out. since everything I believe in revolves around the importance of communication and mutual aid it leaves me as a rather high-brow inmate. this assists in furnishing my sense of total personal worthlessness. I am considering going back on medication. no one can live like this. what’s worse is that this post will look so silly in a day or a week or whatever. I’ll be like ‘oh I’m fine, how stupid of me... how unsurprising? why does it say “go to social services” on my hand?’ “atrophy

When we are depressed the world becomes small and we find ourselves constantly disgusted with the fact that simply brushing our teeth or doing the laundry feels like such a huge task that thinking about something outside ourselves—like world politics or our next-door neighbor—seems next to impossible.

“Depression feels like shrinkage of thought and perspective. There’s no comfort of Big Picture. #1 dilemma becomes how to acquire food without leaving bed, instead of how to write Great American Novel. Meanwhile, the negative thought loop gets shorter and shorter, until all it contains is something along the lines of “everything is bad, everything is bad...”. You can’t even be creative about why the world is a terrible place anymore. There’s only the “terrible,” with no meaning whatsoever. When you put anything on this, it breaks my heart even more. and joy becomes obsolete within moments. I am so sick of interacting with other human beings. as soon as I enter a conversation, I am frantically searching for a way out. since everything I believe in revolves around the importance of communication and mutual aid it leaves me as a rather high-brow inmate. this assists in furnishing my sense of total personal worthlessness. I am considering going back on medication. no one can live like this. what’s worse is that this post will look so silly in a day or a week or whatever. I’ll be like ‘oh I’m fine, how stupid of me... how unsurprising? why does it say “go to social services” on my hand?’ “atrophy

“Here’s my DSM identity - I’m an “ultra-rapid cycling” bipolar I with psychotic features and MIXED STATES! This particular manifestation of hell is profound! Mixed states are like being “tired-wired”. I get jacked up with a mind that feels like it’s on crack, but my body feels like I’m sleeping, can’t even sleep, can’t even breathe.鉅 the catch - all this occurs through the prism of extreme negativity, depersonalization and rage. In other words, I get manic and deeply depressed all at the same time. It’s not a happy, euphoric and mind-expanding mania. It is not a sluggish and low-energy depression. It’s freaking Armageddon.

“Depression is the personal record that I break when I’m depressed, such a huge task that thinking about something outside ourselves—like world politics or our next-door neighbor—seems next to impossible. The personal records that I break when I’m depressed, such a huge task that thinking about something outside ourselves—like world politics or our next-door neighbor—seems next to impossible. The personal records that I break when I’m depressed, such a huge task that thinking about something outside ourselves—like world politics or our next-door neighbor—seems next to impossible.
My history is one of vacant time battling occupied time. It’s so hard to fill that vacancy. It’s so hard to come out of a long depression, because it compels you to admit that a certain unrecoverable period of your life passed with your heart in the toilet. If you remain in that condition, you don’t really have to admit that anything’s wrong.

…But with all these ideals and hope for a better world, and consequently, a better life (or vice versa, depending on your chronological preference), I look forward to sleeping more than being awake pretty often. It’s embarrassing. I, like so many isolated people, exist in and out of denial that there are worthy things in life that might require substantial risks. That just knowing you’re right doesn’t remove hurt from your life. The fact that you’ve raised so many new questions and challenged virtually every assumption you’ve ever held only makes life more difficult. This is why we long for community and friendship. To support each other as much as we mutiny against the culture that crushes us.

I guess I’m not trying to push my ideas or prove anything to anyone, though it might be a good idea. I’m just desperately trying to hold onto love as firmly as my nervous hands despairing to see in this half-empty room, before I fall asleep, arms wanting the softness of skin and sheer curtains blowing in the breeze from a bedroom window in Savannah. The panic resurfaces from the waves. Like there was a missed opportunity at the last exit. And I’ve committed to the next stretch of whatever lonely highway I’ve accidentally ended up on. I’ve got the emotional stability of a high school kid watching their crush make out with someone else to “Last Night I Dreamt That Somebody Loved Me” covered by a tenth grade band in the cafeteria on talent night. How can I be this weak? War is hell. Hell is other people. Hell is trying to connect with other people and failing almost every attempt. I am at peace and at war with everything all at the same time. I am at war with this page. I’m fighting for this paragraph with military style brutality. I want it at war with this page. I’m fighting for this paragraph with military style brutality. I want it at war with everything all at the same time. I am at war with this page. I’m fighting for this paragraph with military style brutality. I want it at war with everything all at the same time. I am at war with this page. I’m fighting for this paragraph with military style brutality. I want it at war with everything all at the same time. I am at war with this page. I’m fighting for this paragraph with military style brutality. I want it at war with everything all at the same time.

My greatest accomplishments are passing thoughts or feelings that break me out of my socially inevitable rank of “unsuccessful.” Today I woke up, went to work, forgot everything that happened there by the time I arrived back at home, watched a movie, ate some leftovers, put on a record I haven’t listened to in a long time and was reminded of how wonderful my friends are. This enormous feeling emerges, a simple appreciation of being alive in the present that echoes in that song with military style brutality. I want it at war with everything all at the same time. I’m fighting for this paragraph with military style brutality. I want it at war with everything all at the same time. I am at war with this page. I’m fighting for this paragraph with military style brutality. I want it at war with everything all at the same time. I am at war with this page. I’m fighting for this paragraph with military style brutality. I want it at war with everything all at the same time. I am at war with this page. I’m fighting for this paragraph with military style brutality. I want it at war with everything all at the same time. I am at war with this page. I’m fighting for this paragraph with military style brutality. I want it at war with everything all at the same time. I am at war with this page. I’m fighting for this paragraph with military style brutality. I want it at war with everything all at the same time. I am at war with this page. I’m fighting for this paragraph with military style brutality. I want it at war with everything all at the same time. I am at war with this page. I’m fighting for this paragraph with military style brutality. I want it at war with everything all at the same time.

This is like writing drunk, and the next day, week, month, year, whenever you emerge from it, you barely remember writing it. But you’re drunk on misery, regret, hopelessness. Squashed by the awfulness of it dreams of being a small creature in an immense space, maybe an immense time. Why do I feel most alive when I’m dead? It’s not what I’m feeling that seems to count, it’s how much. So now I challenge whatever power, event, or misfiring synapses (at least when I was religious, I could blame god) that cause this horror to allow me to experience hope and joy at the same level as the shit I’m in now for just one minute without having to pay dearly for it for months and years with this stubborn leech of emptiness. Fuck you, whatever you are. I will learn your tricks. I’ll break it out of this mind. This mess. I’ll break out of a wooden shoe-polished gun. Like John Dillinger. A dramatic escape from my attic prison. A glorious return to the people and life that I love.

I open my eyes wide and stare at the ceiling in this half-empty room, before I fall asleep, arms wanting the softness of skin and sheer curtains blowing in the breeze from a bedroom window in Savannah. The panic resurfaces from the waves. Like there was a missed opportunity at the last exit. And I’ve committed to the next stretch of whatever lonely highway I’ve accidentally ended up on. I’ve got the emotional stability of a high school kid watching their crush make out with someone else to “Last Night I Dreamt That Somebody Loved Me” covered by a tenth grade band in the cafeteria on talent night. How can I be this weak? War is hell. Hell is other people. Hell is trying to connect with other people and failing almost every attempt. I am at peace and at war with everything all at the same time. I am at war with this page. I’m fighting for this paragraph with military style brutality. I want it at war with everything all at the same time. I am at war with this page. I’m fighting for this paragraph with military style brutality. I want it at war with everything all at the same time. I am at war with this page. I’m fighting for this paragraph with military style brutality. I want it at war with everything all at the same time. I am at war with this page. I’m fighting for this paragraph with military style brutality. I want it at war with everything all at the same time. I am at war with this page. I’m fighting for this paragraph with military style brutality. I want it at war with everything all at the same time. I am at war with this page. I’m fighting for this paragraph with military style brutality. I want it at war with everything all at the same time. I am at war with this page. I’m fighting for this paragraph with military style brutality. I want it at war with everything all at the same time. I am at war with this page. I’m fighting for this paragraph with military style brutality. I want it at war with everything all at the same time. I am at war with this page. I’m fighting for this paragraph with military style brutality. I want it at war with everything all at the same time. I am at war with this page. I’m fighting for this paragraph with military style brutality. I want it at war with everything all at the same time. I am at war with this page. I’m fighting for this paragraph with military style brutality. I want it at war with everything all at the same time. I am at war with this page. I’m fighting for this paragraph with military style brutality. I want it at war with everything all at the same time. I am at war with this page. I’m fighting for this paragraph with military style brutality. I want it at war with everything all at the same time. I am at war with this page. I’m fighting for this paragraph with military style brutality. I want it at war with everything all at the same time.
The arc of rising and falling moods that characterizes bipolar experience does not occur with the same frequency or amplitude for everyone who lives through it. The trajectory described in the preceding pages is usually called the more classic pattern of symptoms, but it is not the only one. For some of us the depressions last months, and reach intensely morbid depths. For others, who are called rapid-cyclers by the psychiatric world, the depression might last only a few days, or even hours, followed by a mania, followed by another depression, and so on, adding up to many cycles over the course of a year. For those of us diagnosed cyclothymic, however, our lives tend to be marked by consistent stretches of a depressive mood that is less black and not as obviously disruptive, but is more persistent, and broken only occasionally by upswings into hypomania. (For more information about the different varieties of bipolar diagnosis, take a look at p. 76, where we’ve reprinted part of the DSM-IV diagnostic criteria.)

Contrary to popular legend, someone diagnosed with manic depression does not live in a perpetual state of madness—all forms of bipolar include periods of time when a person is not experiencing acute symptoms—a “normal” phase, if you will, between episodes—which the medical establishment refers to as a euthymic period. These stretches can last months and even years, even if we’re not on medication—though they say the stretches become shorter and shorter the longer we’re medicated, and even shorter if we tend to rapid cycle. These stretches can make it difficult to believe you actually have a serious problem once the memory of the worst times fades a bit—and so many people go off medication during these periods—but for most of us the mania and the depression will spring up to bite us again.

When the degree of mania and depression that we experience isn’t completely extreme, and when it’s haunting us more often than not, can be the case with Cyclothymia, it can be very hard to figure out what’s going on.

“I’m now trying to come to terms with my personality: my moods and my sensitivity. For me, it’s hard to really pin down my cycles because I’m so caught up in them. But I’ve read Kay Jamison’s book and I recognize that while I do have flights of energy, creativity, and nights without sleeping, I don’t have such full-blown manias. I don’t have hallucinatory trips “to the rings of Saturn.” Hypomania seems to be what I hit. Depression? Well, I had one major bout of depression a year ago. It had to do with grad school collapsing around me and my feeling that I had no out, no escape from my situation. But most of the time I’m just kind of “depressive”. Not flat out depressed, but dealing regularly with low self esteem and poor (or at least very inconsistent) motivation. Before, I thought the waves were the world going up and down. Only a year ago did I realize it was me. Since then, I’ve been watching myself—my moods and my reactions. Depression and elation are there, but the hardest thing in dealing with other people are my outbreaks of anger. They always seem justified, but never to the anger’s recipient...

My ex-girlfriend and still-good-friend has said that it’s painful to watch someone with my potential struggle so much. Outbursts of anger. They always seem justified, but never to the anger’s recipient...

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Depression? Well, I had one major bout of depression a year ago. It had to do with grad school collapsing around me and my feeling that I had no out, no escape from my situation. But most of the time I’m just kind of “depressive”. Not flat out depressed, but dealing regularly with low self esteem and poor (or at least very inconsistent) motivation. Before, I thought the waves were the world going up and down. Only a year ago did I realize it was me. Since then, I’ve been watching myself—my moods and my reactions. Depression and elation are there, but the hardest thing in dealing with other people are my outbreaks of anger. They always seem justified, but never to the anger’s recipient...

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When you’re rapid-cycling, on the other hand, the mood changes can come so fast that it seems like you’ve caught in a perpetual struggle between the extremes of mania and depression that can be equally hard to identify.

“When I’m an ultra rapid cyclers or, rather, it begins with rapid cycling and then, if unchecked, accelerates exponentially into ultra-ultra rapid cycling, until my life can seem a blur of just mixed states. At the time I was diagnosed, which was at my worst, I was switching between extreme states every 15 minutes to 2 hours. The mixed states would last up to 5-10 minutes. About enough time for me to get ready to commit suicide, or at one point, to try to pick up where I had been interrupted before – then, BAM, I’m manic or depressed, and either don’t have the interest or don’t have the energy anymore to go through with it. I think the rapid cycling may actually bring a person closer to a suicidal state faster than the ‘classic’ months/years cycling, if only because those oh-so-dangerous mixed states are much more frequent.

I am glad to have this forum [for rapid cyclers], because as much as all those with bipolar disorder have in common, sometimes it’s hard to relate well with those who have the more “classic” bipolar. I met a woman once who had that. For about 7 months she’d have depression, gain a lot of weight, not accomplish anything. Then she’d have about 3 months of near solid, practically no sleep, mania. She’d become a skeleton and paint like crazy. Then she’d probably have a couple months to a year of remission. And as much as I understood -- and much more than your average person who doesn’t know the difference between feeling down and major depression -- we had a hard time truly understanding the specifically different hues of suffering that the different types of BPD create.” – Amita

When you’re cycling that fast it’s hard to know who you are anymore—the idea of a “real” me seems distant and hard to grasp as your whole world seems to change hourly. For some of us who are sensitive it seems that adding and withdrawing certain psych drugs from our bodies might help trigger this cycling.

“Not soon after some of the first experiments with putting me on SSRIs I started to have what both my psychiatrist and I (after my own extensive research) recognized as mixed states and rapid cycling—a feeling of extreme well being and hyper happiness would descend only to turn minutes later into extreme hopelessness, and this would happen at a dizzying rate until I was afraid to do anything knowing that minutes later my mood would unpredictably segue into some opposite or even worse, mixed extreme like agitated happiness, or raging depression.” –permafrost

While rapid-cycling can be particularly difficult to treat, no form of bipolar responds unanimously to a simple formula, no matter what the textbooks might declare. Our bodies have different sensitivities and different rhythms. Learning to take care of ourselves usually involves changing more than the combination of pills that we swallow.

“my response to all the cycling, when I was living in the city, had basically been to alternate taking on tons of jobs and then when I started crashing to cancel everything and hide—so I had no accountability and NO routine whatsoever and it made it so much easier for the machinations of my brain to seem totally unbearable when things weren’t actually that tragic...you know what I honestly think helped me? three things. a) got on a reasonable dose of lithium b) started working with an energy healer/body worker c) moved to a vegetable farm and started doing physical labor 10 hours a day. I was still having cycles for the first 3 or 4 months I was there, but they were much less dramatic, something more like 3 weeks semi-up and 1 week down, probably also related to monthly hormones. But I really think that having to get my ass out into the sunshine and the mud every day and work until I was tired was SO good for me, and so good for getting off that awful cycling track.” –icarus
I put in a tape of a thousand pink clouds. This is not fair. We cannot love the restless anxiety that I was about to let everyone down? When did the sight of a thousand pink clouds start enacting all the “lifestyle choices” that were supposed to keep me from going over the edge? Why of how to live that was eventually going to transform everyone who met me. How could I start having these black holes and the depression that broke me last time around. I didn't even need to avoid unpleasant experiences anymore. I had so much energy now anyways. I have so much to do. I'm becoming a Great Artist. I'm changing the world. I could feel the heartbeat of the city's construction hammers in my own chest; I could soliloquize on the metaphysics of a doorknob for hours. I was no longer afraid of death. Who would want to stop? But after scaring myself for being exactly what I am; occasionally brilliant, frequently imperfect, mostly kind, and burdened/blessed with something in my blood that can send me divine inspiration in September along with suicidal plans in November.

When I felt myself going up this fall, despite all the changes I’d made in my diet and everything I’d tried to fix, I was still determined that I could handle myself without caving in to the Man and his medicine. I distinctly remember the day I realized I hadn’t slept normally in over two months, a huge red flag. Despite all the reading I’ve done on bipolar disorder I still told myself, “well, I guess I just don’t get to sleep like that anymore. I’ll be fine. I have so much energy now anyways. I have so much to do. I’m becoming a Great Artist. I’m changing the world.” I could feel the heartbeat of the city’s construction hammers in my own chest; I could soliloquize on the metaphysics of a doorknob for hours. I was no longer afraid of death. Who would want to stop? But after scaring myself and my friends with the sudden need to jump off roofs or stay in bed for the rest of my life, I find myself back on medicine, opening my bills for the first time in 3 months and cleaning the neglected, rotting food off my bedroom floor.

I don’t know how this will work. I don’t know if I’ll stay on the drugs forever or even if I’m back in safe territory. I’ve only been on them three days. When I woke up this morning—hours after sunrise, for the first time in ages—there was no one screaming in my head. But I still took off for the Mojave desert some hours later, possessed by a frantic need to escape, and found myself shriek-singing uncontrollably and shaking deep in my skin, flying down the highway determined to make it to Arizona by dawn—but the drugs cut my energy around 4:00 and I wound up back in my apartment, shame-faced, with my roommates shaking their heads. But I wrote this damn story in a narrow hour of sanity, fickle though it may prove to be—which seemed an impossible task even two days ago. So who the hell knows. I guess my point, to quote my roommate, is that I have to learn to be compassionate with myself, even if that means accepting that I need to medicate my brain in order to stick around on this planet. Some people tell me that diabetics just have to take insulin, and I am no different. Other people tell me psych drugs are a way of coping out on the intensity of life and becoming normalized by the screwy system. I am trying to take a more moderate piece of advice to heart—that I must hold lightly. A friend used those words in reference to a romance, but said she thought they also applied to me in my struggles to carve out a sustainable, honest life. She says we must hold lightly to our strategies, that we can’t refuse to adjust our model of what works, no matter how much we’d like to reach the end of our struggles and locate the way out.
Isolation almost always accompanies breakdown. One of the most important things we can do in hard times is reach out and show up, even though that often feels like the most difficult thing to do. Sometimes when you’re near losing it, or when you’re putting your life back together, you have to start small: attend a class once a week, make one phone call, read a book in the library instead of your bed. Sometimes you need a lot of support, and your friends can set up a care calendar where folks take turns signing up for shifts to help with the basics: cooking meals, doing housework, going for walks. Sometimes we find what we need in organized forms of peer support – Icarus groups, 12 step meetings, gatherings of the Hearing Voices network, meditation groups, and more.

Our detours into “crazy” are so often full of clues and real questions. As your head clears it can be important to start paying attention to the meaning in what you’ve been through. The stories we tell ourselves shape so much of our experience, and how we end up feeling about ourselves. Diagnosis is just one way of putting the puzzle pieces together. Many other lenses are possible. Often it can be helpful to read books, blogs, or zines by other folks who’ve struggled like us to see how they’re making sense of it all. When words aren’t so accessible – especially when we’re dealing with profound depression - we can explore our stories through other forms of expression – art, music, dance. Some of us need to communicate with our versions of gods or guides. With deep reservoirs of intergenerational oppression and grief? How can we be more connected to movements for justice and change? Are we trying to adjust to a sick world, or are we on a life journey of transformation? What can we change and what must we accept? How can we feel more connected to forces bigger than ourselves? How do we fill our lives with purpose and beauty? What do we do with all the information flooding into our psyches, or hiding behind walls of memory and fear.

There are so many of us out here who feel the world with thin skin and heavy hearts, who get called crazy because we’re too full of fire and pain, who know that other worlds exist and aren’t comfortable in this version of reality. We’ve been asking the difficult questions for a long time. We’ve been busting up out of sidewalks and blooming all kind of misfit flowers for as long as people have been walking on this Earth. Sometimes we have access to secret layers of consciousness — you could think of us like dandelion roots that gather minerals from hidden layers of the soil that other plants don’t reach. If we’re lucky we share them with everyone on the surface — because we feel things stronger than the other people around us, a lot of us have visions about how things could be different, why they need to be different, and it’s painful to keep them silent. Sometimes we get called sick and sometimes we get called sacred, but no matter how they name us we are a vital part of making this planet whole.

Because we struggle with the extremes of madness, we often have intense empathy and sensitivity towards others: the gift of a big heart and a lot to give. Living through the “old-before-your-time survivor” and/or the “damaged dysfunctional psych patient” can also mean you become the Wounded Healer: a person who’s made it through the fire and come out the other side with stories to tell and skills to share. If we can get past our fears and anxieties, it is us, not the psychiatrists and professionals, who have the knowledge and ability to connect and communicate with each other through pain into unimagined futures.

When we gather together with people who’ve been through what we’ve been through, people who share some of the mysteries and suffering that get labelled ‘mental illness,’’ we discover new maps through crisis, learn new tools to stay healthy, and weave communities of solidarity to change the world. We discover something at the heart of our dangerous gifts: caring for others is often the best way to care for ourselves.
How can we build support networks strong enough to hold us when we go into crisis?

So often when it all comes crashing down, we find ourselves alone, and don’t know what to do.

When you or someone close to you goes into crisis it can be the scariest thing to ever happen. It seems like someone’s life might be at stake or they might get locked up, and everyone around them, they disappear into their room for days, they have wild energy and outlandish plans, they start to dwell on suicide and hopelessness, they stop eating or taking care of themselves. They become a different person. They’re in crisis. What the hell do you do and how do you start healing? Here’s one story of impossible questions and tentative answers from Gumby, a mother trying to help her son ward off the crash and start putting the pieces back together afterwards:

“This has been the year of watching my son (16) soar and sink. Somehow, I always suspected that his brilliance didn’t come without a price.

Last summer, he went ‘bye-bye’ for a couple of weeks. I was living in Eugene at the time, he in Portland with Dad. I knew something was up when he started calling to tell me things like, “Mom! I just realized I have only been using one eye my whole life... now I’m using both and the world looks so different!” and, “In school today I could smell every individual in my class... they each had a different scent and I could identify them all without looking at them,” and “RED FLAG” “I don’t need any sleep at all! I just wrote ten songs in four hours, and recorded them, all the tracks myself.” Then came the crash. By the time I got to Portland, he was nearly catatonic and had forgotten how to eat, drink, or go to the bathroom. He was also having lots of conversations with Jimi Hendrix, or grieving inconsolably about women being raped and the earth being destroyed. My cousin (forced hospitalization survivor thru most of her teen years) and I stayed with him, refused the suggestions of “take him to the hospital”, and basically talked him out of it for four days. He had ‘lucid’ moments, and they got longer and closer together, especially with a guitar in his hands. We took him to his acupuncturist/mentor, and that’s when he finally cleared. We didn’t know...was it a bad acid trip? Or something else? So I packed up, moved to Portland, waited...and watched.

Early this summer, a close friend of his committed suicide with methadone. My son withdrew and started to get increasingly irritated and then all-out angry with me and his dad. His dad and I have been in therapy, learning how to co-parent after ten years of divorce. We started taking our son to the therapist, feeling like he needed help dealing with his friend’s death. But somewhere inside myself, I saw a train-wreck coming. He had stopped sleeping again, and I just knew. I even scheduled a psych evaluation. There was also something about his music. He had stopped playing the guitar, and was instead up all hours writing ‘raps’ that seemed to me incoherent nonsense rhyming (compared to his usually brilliant, cynical lyrics). He didn’t make it to the appointment. A week before he was scheduled to go, I got a call from the University of Portland police. They had picked up my son on campus ‘acting strangely’ and had taken him to the emergency room where he was on Mental Health Watch. They CT-scanned him, drug-tested him and watched him for four hours. I then took him home. (Thankfully they didn’t refuse to let me.) At five the next morning, he woke me up insisting that my house was a meth lab and that he wanted to go to his Dad’s. He shoved me out of the way and ran. Next morning he got violent with his dad, punched and slapped him and threatened to leave. At that point I did a desperate thing that could have gone very badly, but ended up not... I called the police and asked them to help us get him safely to the hospital. (Believe me, it’s hard to admit, as an anarchist, that I would ever call cops. Mom Panic does strange things to your ideals at times. Forgive me. I have to forgive myself... and considering the outcome, I almost have.)

So here we are, dealing with the Mental Health System, a place I was trying so hard to avoid. And yet, somehow I believed that if we could put a label on what was going on, that we could then figure out how to deal with it. He was in for two and a half weeks, on Ativan, Zyprexa, and then Depakote. And here is my treesitting-at-age-11 son asking, “How can you put me on drugs? Who am I? Crazy Duncan? or Not Crazy Duncan on Drugs?” He is struggling trying to concentrate at school, uninspired musically, and understandably mad as hell at his turnout parents. We have to keep asking my famously impatient son to “be patient, they’ll get the dosage right. You don’t have to be a zombie. We promise.” But can we promise that? Is it going to be either/or? Brilliant and creative or doped? I have to believe there is a balance to be struck. Oops - Gotta go...to a psych appt. Again.”
The word “crisis” comes from a root meaning “judgment.” A crisis is a moment of great tension and meeting the unknown. It’s a turning point when things can’t go on the way they have, and the situation isn’t going to hold. Could crisis be an opportunity for breakthrough, not just breakdown? Can we learn about ourselves and each other as a community through crisis? Can we see crisis as an opportunity to judge a situation and ourselves carefully, not just react with panic and confusion or turn things over to the authorities?

Crisis Response Suggestions

1. Working in Teams. If you’re trying to help someone in crisis, coordinate with other friends and family to share responsibility and stress. If you’re the one going through crisis, reach out to multiple people and swallow your pride. The more good help you can get the easier the process will be and the less you will exhaust your friends.

2. Try not to panic. People in crisis can be made a lot worse if people start reacting with fear, control and anger. Study after study has shown that if you react to someone in crisis with caring, openness, patience, and a relaxed and unhurried attitude, it can really help settle things down. Keep breathing, take time to do things that help you stay in your body like yoga and taking walks, be sure to eat, drink water, and try to get sleep.

3. Be real about what’s going on. When people act weird or lose their minds it is easy to overreact. It’s also easy to underreact. If someone is actually seriously attempting suicide or doing something extremely dangerous like lying down on a busy freeway, getting the police involved might save their life. But if someone picks up a knife and is walking around the kitchen talking about UFO’s, don’t assume the worst and call the cops. Likewise if someone is cutting themselves, it’s usually a way of coping and doesn’t always mean they’re suicidal (unless they are cutting severely). Sometimes people who are talking about the ideas of death and suicide are in a very dangerous place, but sometimes they may just need to talk about dark, painful feelings that are buried. Use your judgment and ask others for advice. Sometimes you just need to wait out crisis. Sometimes you need to intervene strongly and swiftly if the situation is truly dangerous and someone’s life is really falling apart.

4. Listen to the person without judgment. What do they need? What are their feelings? What’s going on? Can help? Sometimes we are so scared of someone else’s suffering that we forget to ask them how to help. Better to ask “What has someone in crisis, their point of feeling might be off, but their view might be real and need to be listened to. (Once they’re out of crisis they’ll be able to hear you better). If you are in crisis, tell people what you’re feeling and what you need. It is so hard to help people who aren’t communicating.

5. Lack of sleep is a major cause of crisis. Many people come right out of crisis if they get some sleep, and any hospital will first get you to sleep if you are sleep deprived. If the person hasn’t tried Benadryl, herbal or homeopathic remedies, hot baths, rich food, exercise, or acupuncture these can be extremely helpful. If someone is really manic and hasn’t been sleeping for months, though, none of these may work and you may have to seek out psychiatric drugs to break the cycle.

6. Drugs are also a big cause of crisis. Sometimes people who take psych meds regularly suddenly stop. Withdrawal can cause a crisis. Get the person back on their meds (if they want to transition off they should visit a specially trained doctor) and make sure they are in a safe space. Meds can start working very quickly for some, but for others it can take weeks.

Create a sanctuary and meet basic needs. Try to de-dramatize and de-stress the situation as much as possible. Crashing in a different home for a few days can give a person some breathing space and perspective. Perhaps caring friends could come by in shifts to spend time with the person, make good food, play nice music, drag them to the library, do any of the things that are neglected in crisis, and if you can make an effort to offer them a sanctuary it can mean a lot. Make sure basic needs are met: food, water, sleep, shelter, exercise, if appropriate professional (alternative or psychiatric) attention.

8. Calling the police or hospital shouldn’t be the automatic response. Police and hospitals are not saviors.

They can even make things worse. When you’re out of other options, though, you shouldn’t rule them out. Faced with a decision like this, get input from people who have a good head on their shoulders and know about the person. Have other options been tried? Did the hospital help in the past? Are people overarching? Don’t assume that it’s always the right thing to do just because it puts everything in the hands of the “authorities.” Be realistic, however, when your community has exhausted its capacity to help and there is a risk of real danger.

The alternative support networks we need do not exist everywhere that people are in crisis. The most important thing is to keep people alive.

On Suicide

While it’s easy to romanticize certain sides of bipolar disorder, it is a dangerously incomplete picture: if you believe the statistics, 1 in 3 untreated depressed people commit suicide. In the medical establishment’s opinion, bipolar disorder is a highly lethal condition. Whether or not you choose to see things this way, the stark fact remains that the extremes of bipolar mood swings have driven thousands and thousands of people to kill themselves, and these swings can happen with astounding speed.

There is no accepted theory about why one person who is suicidal ends up doing it and another doesn’t. There is no perfect answer to what you should do when someone is suicidal, and no reliable way to prevent someone from killing themselves if they really want to. Suicide is, and will probably always be, a mystery. There are, however, a lot of things that people have learned, things that come from a real sense of caring and love for people who have died or who might die, and truths people have realized when they were at the brink and made their way back. Here are a few we’ve collected:

1. Feeling suicidal is not giving up on life. Feeling suicidal is being desperate for things to be different. People who are suicidal are often really isolated. They need someone to talk with confidentially on a deep level, ways to change their lives and survive. You are not the only one.

2. People who are suicidal are often really isolated. They need someone to talk with confidentially on a deep level, someone who is not going to judge them or reject them. Did something happen? What do you need? Be patient with long silences, let the person speak. Let people ask for anything, an errand, a place to stay, etc. Often suicidal people really don’t want to be honest because they’re so ashamed of what they are feeling and it is an incredibly hard thing to admit. Be patient and calm.

3. People need to hear things that might seem obvious, like: You are a good person. Your friendship has helped me. You are a good person and you have done things, even if you can’t remember them now. You have loved life and you can love it again. There are ways to make your feelings change and your head start working better. If you kill yourself, nothing in your life will ever change. You will hurt people you love. You will never know what could have happened. Your problems are very real, but there are other ways to deal with them.

4. People who are suicidal are often under the sway of a critical voice or belief that lies about who and what they are. It might be the voice of a parent, an abuser, someone who betrayed you, or simply the twisted bleak version of yourself that depression and madness have put in your brain. Usually this voice is not perceiving reality accurately – get a reality check from someone close and stop believing these voices. You aren’t “a failure,” and change isn’t impossible. And You Are Not Alone – Other people have felt pain this deep and terrible, and they have found ways to change their lives and survive. You are not the only one.

5. There are ways to get past this and change your life.

Advance Directives

If you know your crises get bad enough to get you into a hospital, there is a tool you should use called an Advance Directive. Basically it’s like a Living Will for crises, it gives you power and self-control over what happens to you when you go into a crisis. If you start to lose your mind and have a hard time speaking for yourself, people will look at your Advance Directive to figure out what to do.

There is an elaborate Advance Directive form at the Bazelon legal center you can use at http://www.bazelon.org/issues/advancedirectives/templates.htm, or you can just write a letter and sign it. Write down who you want contacted if you are in crisis and who you don’t want contacted, what hospital you prefer to go to, what medications you do and don’t want to be given, what health practitioner you want to work with, and any special instructions, such as “take me out into the woods” or “help me sleep with these herbs or those pills,” “feed me kale,” or “when you ask me questions, give me a long time to answer, be patient and don’t walk away” or “make sure I can see my pets as soon as possible.”

Write your directive up, get it signed by someone and write ‘witness’ by their name, and date it. Put copies somewhere that your closest people know where it is and where to get it (with a therapist or health practitioner, with family, with people close to you, people in any support or activist group you’re in). Then when you go into crisis, people can use your directive as a guide on how to respond to the situation, and it can be used to help convince hospitals, doctors, etc to respect your choices on how to be treated. (Directives have some legal weight, but not as much as a living will. Ongoing reforms in mental health law may strengthen the role of directives in the future.)
“Sometimes wanting to kill yourself just means you don’t want to live the life you are living and you can change your life with that power - cuz what the hell - you were about to lose your whole life - so why not instead lose your school job pretensis feared adherence to society’s standards shame. I have found some of my suicidal episodes to be strangely liberating in that way. I wouldn’t take back any of what made me who I am today.”

Vent Endure Survive. Sometimes you can thrive and bloom like a flower but sometimes your goal is just to exist and survive like a cactus.

Strikes me sometimes like growing and learning is all about sowing the meaning back into everything you care about after it’s been sucked out and spit on the ground, delving deep and finding your empowerment everywhere you look: from the painful and scary to the ludicrous and beautiful.

“So the thing isn’t evil. No really, I swear it all has to do with harnessing energy, holding onto it and letting it out when you need - not letting the will be one, but to keep that thing and sail you over to the other side. Psychosis is like catching on fire and just letting yourself burn. It leaves scars. And at some point it becomes harder and harder to put the pieces back together. Having control over your powers is going to become more and more important as you get older and less and less easy to do. Trust me on that one. There are lots of different places in your brain that don’t always need to talk to each other. It’s okay to forget things sometimes, even for decades. Let them rest. Don’t try to hold on to all those confusing images and thoughts and plans if you feel them slipping, they’ll come back when you need them when you’re ready to handle them. It doesn’t all have to make sense right now. I guarantee you’ll understand it all more later on.”

It’s good to have a map, even if you know your way around. It helps to get you on these back streets, taking shortcuts that the maps don’t show. You need to have a road pencil and I’d mark the streets as I walked, trying to eventually walk on every street. Maps help give you a different sense of perspective on your town and your place in it. Makes you look at it and its possibilities in new ways.”
There are a lot of big gaping questions on our minds these days, such as: what can we do for our friends in times of extreme crisis to keep them from either getting locked up or hurting themselves?

Here’s a dialogue from the members of The Icarus Project: www.thecarupproject.net

how to support
By: fireweed
a friend has just broken down. it’s been days since she’s slept, her brain won’t stop, and she thinks the only way to end it is to kill herself. we’ve got herbalists flying off into the night to bring her her potions and someone is getting some tranquilizers so that she has a full range of options for short-term fixes. i’m about to head over and spend time with her. we’re going to support her in radically questioning her diet (sugary, and bread) and we’re committed to sticking by her. question is: what shall we do? and how might what we do differ if she’s flying or then if she plunges?

i have a basic trust that love will find a way, and a small amount of practical knowledge in intuitive healing: anyone who has more experience, being manic or midwifing the spirit of those who are, any ideas on what we can do? what have you liked? what has worked?

the right person for the job
By: Eduardo
what works for me, and seems to work for my bipolar girlfriend, is unflinching care and nurturing. i say that and i never notice the word nurturing. it’s what i crave when i’m not well and the only thing that calms me down. also an environment where everything doesn’t have to be perfect and in its neat little place. the breakdown has to be permitted. looking down on ourselves because we can’t ‘keep up’ with either the rest of the world, when we’re low, or our own thoughts and aspirations when we’re ‘up’ is enough of a condemnation to misery without the baffled gaze of others making it worse. anyone with too clear ideas of what normal is or should be can actually worsen the sufferer’s self-esteem. the only thing that seems to help me is a certain amount of pampering from the people i’ve selected to really care about me. this does not always or even usually include self-assigned closest relations such as family. the only thing that comes to my mind is a quote i heard once: “you say that you don’t need to slow down--it may be true that you’re “fast for a reason right now” but the first thing that comes to my mind is a quote i heard once: “speed is the speed of democracy.” and inversely, speed is the friend of capitalism (whether it is cause or result is questionable). but it is virtually impossible to work with people when you’re going too fast to communicate with them. i found it so hard to listen to people when i was crazy--so many other things were demanding my attention, sounds that others couldn’t hear, and i chose for a while to focus on the sounds of the billboards and the pop songs rather than people i knew, and that was wrong. we know who makes those, and i think it’s the enemy. i don’t want to give the enemy more attention than people i love and who love me....” – jennifer audacity

However, Jacks (who was my housemate for the past year) tried some as a way to zonk out when she was in manic states and told me she found it pretty effective. what i remember ashley saying about it was that when her brain was spinning too fast all she really wanted was for it to stop so she could fall asleep and that the poppy tincture helped with that. maybe she’ll weigh in more on her experience with this.

tincture for a little while last fall when i was getting manic, and it seemed to help for a couple days, but the next week i hit a place where i could take twice as much poppy as my 250 pound roommate, pop 3 or 4 benadryls, have a shot of alcohol, and i was still up till 5 conversing with god and the plants, waking up at 6:30 and ditching off to feel the city’s construction hammers echoing through my chest with all the other crazy synchronous thoughts, and 2 or 3 weeks later my head had gotten so fast i was climbing up on the golden gate bridge to see if i should jump. the thing that brought me down was zyprexa. nasty old anti-psychotic. borage and poppy and love and attention and no sugar didn’t do it. i’m not saying they won’t work for other people. just wasn’t enough for me. i had to cave in and see a shrink.

A Note: Since this dialogue was originally published, we have learned a lot more about alternatives in handling crisis and the dangers of rushing to use psychiatric medications. We have met many people who have in fact come back from manic and psychotic states with the help of alternative remedies such as acupuncture, homeopathy, trauma-related therapies, shamanic work, retreat, self-help groups, and time and patience. At the same time, more and more studies are released every day indicating that atypical anti-psychotic medications, and zyprexa in particular, are even more dangerous than previously acknowledged, causing side-effects such as metabolic syndrome, diabetes, obesity, chronic illness, and even death, in a significant number or users. We believe that the decision to treat mental crisis with psychiatric meds, and anti-psychotics in particular, is an extremely loaded choice that should not be undertaken without careful consideration and research into the potential dangers and alternatives.

How do you “talk sense” into someone who refuses to believe they have any kind of problem?
It’s really hard. Sometimes people have to crash and burn to figure things out. But it’s important to try anyway—when we’re flying through the sky we need some mile-markers back on Earth. Even if we’re not ready to hear you clearly, your words stay with us. These are the words one of Sascha’s friends sent him when he was convinced that the last thing he needed was help:

never

“He will never get me.”

“you say that you don’t need to slow down--it may be true that you’re “fast for a reason right now” but the first thing that comes to my mind is a quote i heard once: “speed is the enemy of democracy.” and inversely, speed is the friend of capitalism (whether it is cause or result is questionable). but it is virtually impossible to work with people when you’re going too fast to communicate with them. i found it so hard to listen to people when i was crazy--so many other things were demanding my attention, sounds that others couldn’t hear, and i chose for a while to focus on the sounds of the billboards and the pop songs rather than people i knew, and that was wrong. we know who makes those, and i think it’s the enemy. i don’t want to give the enemy more attention than people i love and who love me....” – jennifer audacity
Questions for Potential Psychiatrists and Therapists

How long have you been practicing?
Do you have experience treating the issues I’m dealing with?
Do you yourself have personal experience of mental illness with your self, friends, or family?
Have you ever worked on a psych unit? Do you have experience working with people in crisis?
Are you familiar with alternative therapies and are you comfortable combining them with medication?

If this is an issue How do you feel about my ambivalence towards taking psych drugs?
Why did you become a mental health worker?
What is it about your work you like?

Where has your work been ineffective?

Hospitals

No one wants to end up in a mental hospital, but sometimes it is the only option currently available for someone in a state of extreme crisis. In certain parts of the country, exciting small projects are opening that offer non-coercive sanctuaries for people in crisis – check out Soteria House Alaska, Soteria Vermont, and Second Story in Santa Cruz, CA for examples. We need a lot more of these! In an ideal world there would be a network of beautiful safe houses everywhere full of nurturing friends, creative activities, and organic food, but unfortunately this is something we need to work to create instead of something that is a widespread reality. For now many of us are stuck with psych wards.

What kind of “extreme crisis” justifies ending up as an inpatient somewhere? The answer really varies depending who you ask. For the mental health establishment you must be “a danger to yourself or to others.” Perhaps the simplest definition is that you cannot take care of yourself at all—you’re intensely suicidal, delusionally manic, or in some other combination of hell that renders you “past the point of all functioning. You need a safe place where you’re not going to hurt yourself and you’re not going to have to be responsible for anything, and your friends and family may not be able to provide this. At some point they may be overwhelmed, or there may be no one to take care of you, and you might need some medical intervention to derail total catastrophe—in the world we live in, the hospital may become the only alternative.

One thing to keep in mind is that even if you’re terrified of having to go to the hospital, if it’s seeming like you might end up there at some point anyway, it’s wise to pick a hospital that you can live with— not the one that the police bring you to in restraints. You might want to designate a friend or family member to help deal with the bureaucracy and advocate for your rights should the time come. Hospitals are miserable places to end up, but it’s usually a very temporary situation and there are ways you can make the best of it and learn lessons to keep you from having to end up back there.

If you’re doing the research for yourself or for a friend to find the best hospital around, here are a few things to ask: Can your friends have easy access to visit you? If you already have a doctor you trust, can your doctor consult on your care? Can any other outpatient providers (counselors and therapists) be involved in decision making? Do patients have access to the outdoors, decent food, alternative therapies, or books?

Know your rights!

If you end up in the emergency room, no hospital is allowed to refuse you treatment due to lack of funds if you’re in a state of extreme crisis—they should push through Emergency Medicaid. But this also means they can commit you against your will if you decide to back out in the waiting room and they’ve decided you need treatment.

Not everyone who ends up in the psych ward checks themselves in voluntarily. We’re encouraging you to get real about the problems in your head before you end up getting dragged in by an authority figure of one form or another. If it’s decided that your judgment is impaired and you are too dangerous to yourself or others to walk the streets, you can be incarcerated against your will; this is called a “5150 hold.” During this time you have no right to refuse drugs or...
treatment. The psych team has 24 hours to decide whether to release you or try to make you stay in the hospital; usually they’ll try to convince you to sign yourself in voluntarily. If you’re checked in voluntarily, you have the right to refuse drugs and the right to check yourself out. If you won’t agree, and they still think you’re a hazard, they can commit you involuntarily for 72 hours—this involuntary commitment can be extended indefinitely as long as the treatment team can substantiate their reasons for doing so. The only way to overturn them is to win a hearing with a judge.

Honestly, time spent in a hospital can be excruciatingly miserable, in no small part because you had to be in a pretty bad state to end up there in the first place; it can be boring and barely remembered through a haze of psych drugs; it can feel incredibly claustrophobic and horribly depressing; it can be a welcome respite from the pressure of trying to keep together a daily appearance of normality around functioning people; it can feel like you’re being held hostage by a bunch of patronizing doctors who have no idea what you’re talking about; it can feel a cinderblock prison full of zombies; it can feel like a collection of people whose versions of reality are too bizarre and interesting to be walking the streets; it can feel like hell or it can feel like the most necessary calm in the eye of a storm. But no matter how you experience it, hospitalization is temporary; you will make it through and tell the tale. If you’re determined, getting hospitalized can be the first step in making a serious commitment to healing yourself and listening hard to what your soul needs to live out all its crazy dreams. Your spirit is not dead. If you make it through this you will be strong as hell—and you will be able to help so many people. Don’t give up.

“The part of healing is, ‘I had this vision in the hospital… I was still pretty manic but I was so dulled down from all the drugs that it was hard to think clearly about much of anything or remember who I was. I was beginning to despair, wondering if I’ll ever have my life together again or feel passion about anything.”

So here’s the memory: I’ve just come from the med line and I lie back in bed. I’ve slickly pocketed the depakote and as I’m lying there with its blood level decreasing in my system, I feel this power inside of me that I’d forgotten was there, literally feel it welling up and pouring out of me without its suppression from the drug. Then I have one of those half-dream images. There are a bunch of other people in the room, patients and hospital workers and doctors and I know they can’t see it, but I close my eyes and feel weeds growing all around my bed, vining and trellising plants, bunch grass, and dandelion flowers. I can feel the wild still in me even amidst the sterile hospital walls. It’s my little secret and I grin to myself. And even though I know the road is going to be hard, I know for that moment that in the end everything is going to be alright.”—Sascha

The diagnoses they give you are useful to a degree—they allow us to navigate the system, and if we do our research and read up on the words they’re using they can allow us to make good choices about getting medical help when we need it—pharmaceutical drugs that might overpower the demons or the depression, or therapy that might help us get a clear look at our history. But drugs and doctors are only the beginning—once you know you have this delicate, powerful, and potentially devastating tendency in your blood, you need to start looking at yourself as a whole person and start seeking ways to heal your body and mind. You need to define for yourself what healthy means, what an “appropriate level of functioning” is for you and your beliefs, and then try to take what you can from any tradition that might help you get there, whether it’s Western medicine or Chinese herbs. We’re going to talk about psych drugs in the next section, but for right now we want to focus on the things you can do to help yourself.

Patience, Hope, and Holding On

“Patience, Hope, and Holding On”

The weeks and months after a serious crash or a period of intense cycling are fragile, slippery, and frustrating. Things will start getting better, but whether you’re taking Depakote or herbal tinctures, nothing is going to fix you immediately. If you choose to go on medicine it often takes months to find a combination and dosage that works, and you will probably have a bunch of side effects at first—often they will taper off after a few weeks. For people more prone to rapid-cycling, the introduction and withdrawal of various medications can intensify cycling for a while. You might feel much better for a week and then hit a low again. You might have to change doctors or acupuncturists or schools. You might not make any sense to the people who love you and consistency might seem like a castle in the clouds. This process requires patience, persistence, and a lot of hope. But know that so many of us have been there before, riding the strange strung-out purgatory between the flights and falls of madness and the awkward days of re-learning to walk—and eventually we all remembered how to dance.

One Good Day

First you need to focus on getting through each individual day. Just that. Keep it slow and simple. It’s so much easier to take care of things before they get totally out of hand then it is to do the damage control after the fact—so start with the basics. Try making a list of things you HAVE to do everyday to keep yourself healthy. These are things that are actually MORE important than all those projects you wish you were doing or all those people you want to be hanging out with—you need to do this stuff first. This was the list they gave Sascha in the halfway house last time around:

- a) get enough sleep
- b) eat enough good food
- c) take my drugs
- d) go to work
- e) exercise
- f) talk to friends
- g) go to work
- h) exercise
- i) talk to friends
- j) go to work
- k) exercise
- l) talk to friends
- m) go to work
- n) exercise
- o) talk to friends

These are some of the really important basics that you should consider putting on your list, but you’ll probably want to come up with some of your own. The important thing is that you have structure to refer back to when your mind is slowly unclouding and basic routine is something that can orient you. This way, if you’re feeling off, you can go through the list and figure out if there’s anything that you might have forgotten to do.

Routine

“Routine, my friend”

“The routine is this, you see. I’ve spent so confused, cycling (or so they tell me), I just know I spent 45 straight hours in bed with no energy but so many ideas I couldn’t keep track of my head, trying to figure out how to ‘manage’ this shit. Trying to decide if I should keep living in my wonderful crowded chaotic punk house or go somewhere a little more mellow and discipline-friendly. How important has getting on a schedule been for people? How important has discipline been? I.e., how much of my live-only-in-the-present-all-night-projects-dumpstering-extravaganzia life can I hold onto?”—ers

Across the board it seems that Having a Stable Routine is Really Important for folks who are trying to put their lives back together. A set time to get up in the morning, a set time to go to sleep at night, and a relatively organized and consistent set of things to do during the day.

“One thing you might want to add to your routine is doing something to help you live with the present, even if you can’t fully roll with it. For me, caring, supportive, challenging environments, a fairly consistent routine of eating, sleeping, exercising and handing, and some responsibility or situation where my presence is necessary and desired, these are all things that, while in the depths of a severe depression won’t have an outwardly visible immediate or dramatic effect that any number of meds would, but they WILL serve as the almost invisible underpinning of increased well-being that I may not even be able to see until they’ve been “on board” for several months.”—permastories

Taking Control of Our Mental Health Part III—Committing to Taking Care of Ourselves

What do you do with your life now?

Part of being diagnosed bipolar is realizing you have to make serious changes to keep from ending up in the same holes over and over again. You have to start taking care of yourself and making your health a priority, even if the people around you have less fragile systems and can sustain a more chaotic lifestyle. And when you’re trying to crawl out of the hardest places, your health needs to be the biggest priority in your life, even if you think you don’t have time for it, even if you define yourself as someone who stays up all night and drinks coffee and smokes cigarettes instead of eating meals, even if lots of people depend on you. You must carve out some time to heal.
One of the big distinctions it seems important to make is between the needs of someone who’s in a crisis period and trying to get their life together and the needs of someone who’s relatively stabilized.

“I don’t exactly have a schedule now, but the biggest thing is I try to get 8 hours of sleep every night. And I save staying up past 12 for an occasional thing, not a consistent thing. And what I’ve always found is that the longer I’m stable the more flexible I can get with my schedule, but that when I’m coming out of hell I have to be more consistent about going to bed at a reasonable hour and showing up somewhere every day to work or get my hands dirty. You do not need to be a member of the 9 to 5 beehive to be functional.”

A lot of people who are bipolar have a hard time focusing on everyday work, and that probably explains partially why so many of us naturally gravitate towards subcultures with standards of living that deviate from the mainstream. While having a lifestyle where more freedom is permitted, like being self-employed, or where very little money is needed, like living in a collective house, dumpster-diving, riding freight trains and hitchhiking etc., might feel more true to your soul and who you eventually want to be, when you’re coming out of a crisis it’s often much easier to get your life together if you accept a little structure from the outside, whether in the form of a consistent job or regular yoga classes.

Work can be really healthy sometimes – it builds self esteem, teaches us lessons about having to get along with other people, and directs our energy away from the problems in our brains and towards something outside ourselves. When you’re in a rut it’s an excuse to get out of the house.

Another note about routine — our routines aren’t limited to some major activity we do for 8 hours every day. Making little routines for yourself, whether it’s drinking a cup of tea every day at 5:00, checking in with your seedlings, or riding your bike to the library, can be so helpful. Make plans to check in with a friend every Tuesday, sign up for a dance class and actually go twice a week, join a group like Food Not Bombs and cook food with a group of people every Friday, play online bingo, whatever it takes to know you’ve got some commitments to keep and some deliberate moments to punctuate your days.

Exercise

It’s seems pretty obvious that a huge factor in so many people feeling so crazy all the time is that our society has “evolved” to the point where most people don’t have to use their bodies for work anymore. That means most of us spend a lot more time in our heads, which isn’t necessarily always the best place to be!

Physical exercise can be one of the most important aspects of anyone’s mental health.

“One of the most important things I ever did, when I wasn’t even sure I wanted live and felt out of mind self-conscious and alienated from other people, was start draggin’ my ass to an incredibly intense Capoeira Angola class. I was completely lost but fully engaged and absorbed in learning the difficult movements...for the time I was in the class I entered a truly transcendent space where all I could hear was my breathing and all the insidious poison negative thought loops completely receded- there simply wasn’t room for them.

Studies show that exercise at least 3x a week is a better anti-depressant than any of the SSRI’s, and the mood-elevating effects kick in quicker and last longer. And it comes from you, not a pill, which is a very different high. Even when happiness or peace still seems elusive you can gird yourself with the sense of achievement in making physical progress, not to mention zero side-effects and detoxing yourself from years of accumulated pharmaceutical build-up. Try pursuing a class with a reputable teacher of chi gong, tai-chi, yoga --or if you’re up to something more energetic, a dance class you have always wanted to take. At least these are pro-active healing modalities and not passive recipient-healer set ups. It’s good to have
a balance of both in your life— even at your sickest.
And also- don’t set yourself up for failure, start with a small goal and get support for it from family, friends or therapist. Also, joining a class is much easier than you’re seriously depressed than trying to focus on something alone— every time you quit you’ll beat yourself up— you’re much less likely to do so when surrounded by a bunch of other people with a teacher to focus on.” -permafrost

Even if sports aren’t something you’ve ever been into, using your body can make a big difference in your life.

A few words from the kid who always got picked last on the teams and didn’t climb a tree till he was 15: I always associated exercise with the jock kids in my school, and I hated them. I always felt really awkward and shameful of my body. I hung out with the punks, and we were too cool to play sports. Quitting smoking cigarettes and swimming everyday when I was 22 years old saved my life. Everything’s so connected— personally, I’ve learned to go running when my mind is starting to race – exhaust myself, burn up some of that manic energy so that my body can’t help but fall asleep when I need it. And I get so much of my best thinking done when I’m running or swimming. I discovered some years ago that YMCA’s are actually really cool places that give you access to a whole diverse community of people who are all striving to be healthy. They have affordable scholarship memberships, and once you have a card you have access to any YMCA in the country. Having a place to exercise and take a shower every day has been so good for me at times when my life at home or on the road has been really chaotic.

Exercise doesn’t have to be something you set aside as a separate activity— you can make it part of your daily work whether you’re doing construction or digging in the dirt. You can do simple things like walk or ride a bicycle rather than drive. You can take the stairs rather than the elevator. Stretching in the morning is a simple way to reconnect with your own muscles and calm your mind. Just remember that you are a whole person and not just a brain and finding balance involves healing all of you.

Sleep

Sleep is usually one of the first things to go at the beginning of a manic cycle and one of the only things we can manage to do when we’re miserably depressed. Sleep can clue us in to where we are on our personal ups and downs—you might notice that when you’re starting to get manic you stay up later and later, or wake up earlier every day. You might notice that being unable to get out of bed every morning or wanting to crawl back into bed by sunset means you’re starting to get depressed.

Having regular sleep cycles is definitely key to holding ourselves together. Those of us who are bipolar seem to have really sensitive “internal clocks” and losing even a single night’s sleep can disrupt our whole rhythm and start us down that path to mania. Don’t ban yourself from the space after midnight forever— just think of it as a powerful place to visit that isn’t safe to stay. Staying up late can be intoxicating and some of the best ideas and most amazing experiences seem to come out of that edge space, but if we let ourselves go there too often or for too long we’re likely to end up in trouble— walking around feeling the whole world creeping under our fingernails and unable to shut off our brains. Good sleep is important to everyone, but to us it’s precious.

“How do you get yourself better sleep when you need it? Here are a few suggestions that don’t involve psych drugs: get more exercise during the day, opt out of activities that start late at night, drink herbal teas like chamomile and scullcap, tie something over your eyes to keep the light out in the morning, run a constant noise like a fan or a noise machine, ask a friend for a back-rub before bed, set regular times that you go to bed and wake up that correspond to daylight and stick to them, don’t start fascinating activities after 8:00 PM.

And what about psych drugs? All the methods we listed above might help us out when things aren’t too serious, but don’t necessarily do the trick for everyone when we’re really having problems. For some of us, taking psych drugs for sleep seems to make sense when it’s an emergency; for others, taking them at the first signs of a problem keeps us from hitting the stage where we really crash. Once you get to know yourself well, you might notice one day that you’ve been hearing three cds playing in your head for the last 48 hours, your eyes are getting wilder, and your words are getting faster every time you talk. For you this usually means you’re starting an upswing— need if you take an extra pill to help you sleep tonight it might disrupt the process. You have to get to know yourself and recognize when things like trans-continental plane flights or nasty breakups or the first day of summer mean you’re likely to get triggered and might want to start getting extra sleep sooner rather than later. And if you find that these drugs are helping you, it might be good to carry a couple extra pills with you in case you end up crashing on someone’s couch.

Here’s an excerpt from a letter Sascha wrote to an 18-year old kid who’d just gotten out of the psych ward and was struggling to figure out what role he wanted drugs to play in his life:

“...And this is the most important thing I’ll tell you: you need to get enough sleep, okay? Even though that edge space of night and day is where most of the good stuff happens, you can’t be there all the time. Not everyone can do what you do, but you gotta save all that ability for when you really need it. That’s where the Zyprexa they’re giving you comes in. If you want to get scientific about it, Zyprexa or olanzapine, dulls the dopamine receptors in your brain, keeps them from firing out of control, because people like us have too much too fast going on. We overhear and catch on fren. We see too much and hear too much until we’re blind and burnt out. Zyprexa isn’t evil. Eli Lilly, the company that makes it, definitely s evil, but the drugs are just tools. If you catch it early enough they say you can do the same thing with meditation and yoga and tai chi and herbs. But I know for myself that I can take all the valerian and skullcap and california poppy and kava kava and blue vervain I can stomach and I’m still clawing at the walls and wandering the late night streets. I take 2.5mgs of Zyprexa when I can’t sleep sometimes and it knocks me on my ass. Which is just what I need periodically to get me back on track. Sweet sleep, brings me back down to earth speed. Which is really important to be able to do if you want to make your way around this world.”

Paying attention to our sleep can help us learn our own cycles, and learn to control the extremes and take advantage of the creative energy of our manias and the depressive energy that draws us back into ourselves. The modern medical model sees our moods as dysfunctions, but those of us who know better see potential in our internal changes and sensitive chemistry. We just have to be more careful than other folks. It’s the responsibility that comes with having extra gifts.

Dreams

There’s something very strange about the fact that our culture doesn’t take dreams more seriously. Dreams are full of clues if we allow ourselves to see them. All masked in layers of metaphor and symbol. Keep a pad and paper by your bed and write your dreams every night – just start with whatever little fragment comes out, it gets easier the more you do it. It’s like exercising a muscle, you get more control after awhile. Dream journals are a whole other set of maps, maps to the underground unconscious each of us carries around with us. Sometimes dreams can even let us know where we are and where we might be going.

“Sleep deprivation is such a problem that before modern treatments were available, roughly 15 percent of manic patients lost their lives to physical exhaustion.” From Bipolar Disorder Demystified, p. 170.
Food and Healing—the things Jacks wishes someone told him long ago...

There are so many things that can make us feel powerless, from the overwhelming amount of violence on the evening news to the way our families treat us. Being prone to extreme mood swings can make us feel totally trapped by our biochemistry in a way that is really hard to deal with!

And we are almost always told that the doctor is the person with the power to fix it. When I first got out of the hospital I was told to call my shrink if I had any hint of “symptoms”— racing thoughts, a single night of sleeplessness, an overwhelming desire to flee. It made me fear myself. It made me panic that I was headed straight back to the hole of a total breakdown every time I laid down to sleep and saw an instant slideshow behind my closed eyes or felt a million ideas expending in my brain.

The way to deal with these behaviors never involved me and my decisions—it all came down to adjusting my medications. No one ever told me I would probably experience symptoms to some degree for the rest of my life. No one ever suggested that the cognitive and perceptual patterns of this “illness” are part of who I am, but that they could be kept to a level that didn’t disrupt my daily existence. It seemed like I was supposed to expect and demand a state of normalcy.

It wasn’t until I found myself plagued with another round of unrelenting migraines that I looked past the Western Medical Establishment and opened up enough to investigate other forms of healing. I bought a book called Healing With Whole Foods; Asian Traditions and Modern Nutrition, by Paul Pitchford. Exposing myself to different conceptions of health and treatment totally changed my life.

I have discovered that I can actually be a physically strong person if I take good care of myself. I have hardly been sick since changing my diet in ways the author recommended.

Making deliberate choices about how we treat our bodies and minds can put the power back in our own hands. Deciding for ourselves what stability means, and how much our symptomatic behaviors need to be controlled, can put the power back in our own hands. Telling ourselves, when we are experiencing a little depression or a day of particularly heightened visions, that it is not a hallucination, is important if we are to be fine once it passes, puts the power back in our own hands. Deciding for ourselves that a behavior feels like it’s slipping past our control—that the thoughts are too fast or the desire to stay in bed too consuming—and helping ourselves, whether that means taking a pill, visiting the doctor, or drinking a strong cup of chamomile tea, is putting the power back in our own hands.

For me, realizing that I could play a huge part in my own health by paying attention to what I eat has been incredibly empowering. It has not replaced traditional medicine entirely, but it has changed my life more than I can tell you. So here are a few of the things I’ve realized:

One of the most irresponsible things about Western medicine is that doctors don’t ask you what you eat.

Think about how they’re trained: they spend years in residency, working unbelievable hours, getting no sleep, drinking coffee and eating bad food. How are you supposed to learn to heal people when your very education requires treating your own body like crap? Is Western Medicine about health or is it about identifying symptoms off checklists and prescribing drugs?

I’ve seen a lot of doctors. I spent the first 21 years of my life with god-awful allergies, constant sinus infections, asthma, bronchitis, migraines, and I can count on one hand how many good sw... The answer was always to put me on another medication: prednisone for the exocruting allergy attacks, a stronger antibiotic for the sinus infections that came afterwards, the latest expensive drug for migraines, a stronger inhalar for the asthma, a higher dose of Depakote for the craziness. No one ever asked why I got sick over and over and over. And no one ever thought about relating the illness in my body to the illness in my brain.

It wasn’t until I found myself plagued with another round of unrelenting migraines that I looked past the Western Medical Establishment and opened up enough to investigate other forms of healing. I bought a book called Healing With Whole Foods; Asian Traditions and Modern Nutrition, by Paul Pitchford. Exposing myself to different conceptions of health and treatment totally changed my life.

I have discovered that I can actually be a physically strong person if I take good care of myself. I have hardly been sick since changing my diet in ways the author recommended. (But I have gone back on psych drugs. I think all the ways I deal with food have been instrumental in helping me get by on a very low dose, but at least for now, I find that I need it. (Which, vegetal help too.)

So I’m going to share with you some of what I’ve learned. A suggestion: when I first got into this stuff I made this deal with myself that I would try these diet changes for 2 weeks and see if I felt a difference. I figured if I was willing to trying a pill for 10 days, I might as well give a kale a fair shot. After 2 weeks I felt better than I had in years. So if something sounds interesting to you, you have nothing to lose by jumping in and then doing some research of your own. There is SO much information out there if you start looking for it; this is only a tiny sliver. Please use what I’ve compiled as a starting point for your own investigations, and know that I’m not a professional, only a fellow traveler down this crooked path.

What is Manic Depression?

Interestingly, when you look into natural treatment of bipolar disorder you’ll discover that most people advising treatments do see it as a condition with a biochemical component—but often they advocate treating it with food, enzymes, and herbs instead of pharmaceuticals. Allen Darmen gives a clear explanation of a nutrient-based way of understanding manic depression on his very helpful website: “Understanding Manic Depression: Explained” (http://www.geocities.com/allen_dar/index.htm):

“Manic depression is a condition of biochemical imbalance in the biochemistry that all human beings are made out of: biochemicals with names such as neurotransmitters, hormones, enzymes. The levels of neurotransmitters, hormones, and enzymes in the human body and brain are heavily dependent on the levels of essential nutrient precursor substances that these biochemicals are made out of, essential nutrient substances with names such as vitamins, minerals, amino acids. and essential fatty acids. In simple terms, correction of the condition of biochemical imbalance in manic depression involves controlling the levels of essential nutrient precursor substances in the human body, such that adequate and proper levels of neurotransmitters, hormones, and enzymes are maintained at all times. This involves identifying and correcting all of these malabSORptive and allergic issues such that one’s biochemistry become deficient such that a psychiatric diagnosis was the end result.”

I recommend looking at his website for some very concrete suggestions about what kinds of foods, enzymes, and vitamins are useful in treating bipolar. He is stridently anti-pharmaceutical, but his suggestions are very good. You’ll definitely find some overlap between his piece and what I say below, but he gets specific about foods and things like stomach acid and proper bowel flora in a way I don’t feel comfortable doing because I don’t know enough.

Another excellent resource for as far as specific foods go is the “mood foods” website: (www.bipolarworld.net/Meds_Tr

Yet another way to view manic depression is through the lens of Eastern Medicine. Chinese medicine looks at mental illness as an outgrowth of imbalances in various elements and energies, like fire and air, yin and yang, as well as a result of deficiencies in various organs, particularly the liver. I am not at all equipped to explain these ideas to you—but I want to suggest that there are different ways of understanding mental illness within different healing traditions. Again, I would recommend a book called Healing With Whole Foods as a good place to start your own investigation of Eastern conceptions of health and practical steps to incorporate some of this wisdom into your daily life.

I’m going to start with what I do know from experience:

Three Meals A Day and Eating Breakfast

An easy place to start talking about correcting the kinds of nutrients in your body is to talk about how often you consume them. We’ve all heard that we should eat three meals a day, but so many of us don’t pay any attention. So often I was pretending to eat way too much to do to cook. I good meals, I was more than glad to spend a for nine hours and scarf a bowl of Cheerios around sunset than to eat something good for breakfast when it was still morning. But many bipolar people have hypoglycemic tendencies— if we don’t eat regularly our blood sugar drops and it makes it hard to concentrate, easy to be irritable, and much more likely that we will be big of mood swings. If you eat a solid breakfast every day it’s a lot easier to think, a lot easier to have control over what you eat later in the day—cause if you’re not feeding your body you’ll have a nice bit of routine and a sense that you’re taking care of yourself. We need to stop, sit down, make contact with the physical world, and eat something humble like oatmeal. We get in trouble if we’re up in our heads all day long. And eating regularly, whether that’s 3 meals a day or always carrying an apple and half a sandwich in your bag in case you need it, makes the biggest difference in being able to function consistently and not hitting unnecessary crises of anger, angst, hysteria, depression, etc. And eating something that will give you sustainable energy like complex carbohydrates—instead of quick fixes like bread products, sugary snacks, or junk food—makes a huge difference. Try it and you’ll see.

Sugar

Eating Refined Sugar is Bad. It is especially bad for bipolar folks. Anyone you read for nutritional advice on healing bipolar will say this—it’s pretty much uncontentious. And most of us grow up eating tons of it. Sugar is in everything from pimples to hair loss to migraines (in particular) is a very concentrated substance, like cocaine, and it produces a drastic, immediate response in your body—spiking your blood sugar, which gives you temporary energy, and spiking the levels of serotonin in your brain, which helps keep your mood even. And there’s no way you experience a crash and want more sugar. For bipolar folks, who have these up and down patterns anyway, who tend towards hypoglycemia, and who tend to have very sensitive digestive systems, this can wreak havoc much more quickly than the average person. And refined sugar has none of the minerals that help your body digest it like those found in foods with naturally occurring sugars (like whole grains, fruit, and sweet potatoes), so it weakens your digestive system and contributes exponentially to the development of yeast problems (candidiasis)—something...
so common in bipolar folks that many natural health practitioners think it can be the cause of bipolar disorder in people with susceptible systems. More about that later. But here are a few tips about getting off sugar: First off, do it gradually. Sugar is an addictive substance and your body will go through withdrawal. Have other foods around that you can eat when you’re craving it, like carrots or apples. Often we reach for sugar when we really need protein to keep us going in our system and we just don’t have much protein. High protein meals, like fish and other seafood, can replace the missing taste of food, as well as nutrition in the factory, and contain lots of artificial flavors, which are particularly sensitive, and it seems a lot of bipolar people are particularly sensitive, and it seems a lot of bipolar people don’t do as well. You get the idea.

Food Allergies and Sensitivities

Bipolar people tend to have a lot of food allergies. The medical establishment rarely investigates things like this. Wheat and dairy are particularly frequent offenders. When I finally made a committed effort to cut these two out of my life, I felt better overall, even though I lost weight. It’s obvious that alcohol’s a drug and we’re not supposed to consume large quantities of refined sugar, red meat, white flour, dairy, processed foods, and alcohol, and have often used large and repeated doses of antibiotics, all of which had been true for me. Now the obvious question is—don’t so many Americans grow up like this? Yes, they do (and compared to non-Western countries so many Americans have astounding rates of heart disease, diabetes, cancer, and obesity too…) but some of us are particularly sensitive, and it seems a lot of bipolar people (and this one for sure) can’t tolerate this standard diet without having to be perfect—but don’t let sugar be a staple.

SAID: The Standard American Diet

So first let me confess: I am not a saint. Before I made all these changes I’m talking about I was a horrible eater. My favorite foods were fried chicken and blueberry donuts, and I consumed tons of processed food, tons and tons of sugar (I was totally addicted to Snickers, for one thing), lots of meat, lots of alcohol, lots of white bread and cookies, etc., etc. Then I found a page in Healing with Whole Foods that linked allergies, itchiness, headaches, sweet cravings, mood swings, yeast infections, general low immunity, a host of other symptoms, and bipolar disorder to candidiasis and I freaked out. Candidiasis is a condition of an overgrowth of yeast in the system. This develops when your body has trouble digesting the substances you put into it. Over time it causes a depressed immune system and the problems listed above. According to Paul Pitchford, the people most likely to develop these problems have probably grown up consuming an inappropriate diet, which includes large quantities of refined sugar, red meat, white flour, dairy, processed foods, and alcohol, and have often used large and repeated doses of antibiotics, all of which had been true for me. Now the obvious question is—don’t so many Americans grow up like this? Yes, they do (and compared to non-Western countries so many Americans have astounding rates of heart disease, diabetes, cancer, and obesity too…) but some of us are particularly sensitive, and it seems a lot of bipolar people (and this one for sure) can’t tolerate this standard diet without having to be perfect—but don’t let sugar be a staple.

Why these foods? To be very brief: white flour has been stripped of its whole-grain nutrition, and is a simple carbohydrate that immediately breaks down into sugar and is bad for the same reasons; processed foods lose most of their nutrition in the factory, and contain lots of artificial flavors, sugar and salt to replace the missing taste of food, as well as an assortment of chemicals that can mess with our brains; red meat is a very powerful food with a lot of fiery energy that over stimulates our system and can contribute greatly to yeast problems. It depletes your immune system. When you’re drinking it can be much harder to control your food cravings (and how late you stay up, but I’m not trying to turn you into a nun.) If you cut back, your body will probably be very happy and your moods will probably be more stable. So this is a big one.
What helps in the bad times? By: Icarus

hey all-- so sascha and i are putting together this reader, and we want to have a page or two on what helps us when we’re in a bad place--being held, music, blue-green algae, whatever it is that people have found. here are a couple paragraphs i wrote:

Slight smile. Thich Nat Hanh and Ed Brown say to practice smiling. This can be so very hard. But sometimes when I feel particularly lost I will force the corners of my mouth up and the muscles will feel rusty, creaky, like the Tin Man’s elbows after too much rain. But I will force them and if I am lucky I will remember a Buddha I saw at the Met once, a dark brown Buddha with the smallest, wisest smile. She was sitting cross-legged and when I looked at her I could tell that she was sitting with everything, waiting it all out and smiling over some inner mystery. I could tell she was kind and when I think of her I remember about kindness and about sitting cross-legged myself with an achy back trying to learn quiet and compassion in my muscles, and bones, where it might stick. If I am lucky the smile feels less forced now and I remember something like the way the reeds rose up out of the pond by the bench where I would sit in the sun and feel the slightest hint of grace unfolding in my belly.

Books help. Food helps. Making myself get out of bed and cook something reminds me that I am capable of doing this life thing. The smell of garlic frying. The slippery tendencies of onions. When I eat I feel glad, for a little while at least, that I am actually taking care of myself. When I can’t take care of myself and someone else cooks for me it helps more than you could ever imagine. It is sort of like being held.

animals By: Anon

When my inner world sucks and I feel like cringing up and dying - I am removed from those feelings for a brief and shining moment when I can snuggle up with the warm, purring presence of one of my cats. Animals are great!

doing nothing by: dianalupi

funny that jacks mentioned blue green algae. I raved about that body- fuel one day on a long hike together. Funny that. Even that one comes in and out. Sometimes crave it and sometimes just don’t want it. Cycles. Change. Anitcha.....a beautiful word I learned recently in the Vipassana meditation tradition which means “change”. The meditators come back to that word as their ass aches or the terror of quiet and compassion in my muscles, and bones, where it might stick. If I am lucky the smile feels less forced now and I remember something like the way the reeds rose up out of the pond by the bench where I would sit in the sun and feel the slightest hint of grace unfolding in my belly.

being taken care of by someone loving, in a slightly regressive way for a little while (which has only happened to me once but I think about it wishfully) or being looked in on, invasively if necessary (we’re worried about you and we came even though you said not to). Having someone that loves you drag your ass out of bed in a very firm manner and make you accompany them to some activity that will engage you completely for a while (exercise teaching a class etc.) - and hopefully doing this every day, when you can’t do it for yourself- until you’re well enough to be trusted to keep up the routine. Just any way really someone can help you enforce a routine initially if you’ve already fallen so far down, and keep up with you and at you until it’s firmly established.

Hanging on if you are unconditionally and not seek to “cheer you up”, or offer endless advice about what else you can do (implying that somehow you haven’t really been trying) when you’re there (depression feels like a hinterland of awareness, so often when I’m not there I refer to it as something far away) but just be willing to accompany and witness- so you’re not alone at the outer reaches- someone anchoring you to the fact, even if abstract at the time, that life may possibly be sometime in the future, a thing worth fighting for, that they’ll be waiting for you and will help you get back to land.

That they witness and acknowledge your struggle and bravery- that’s a big one.

often some professional does a history or intake and after I’ve regurgitated in a quavery robot monotone what the recent past “stressors” have been- I’m always caught off guard if they look at me and they mean it and they say- “It’s been hard hasn’t it, and you’ve been so brave” as opposed to duly noting it all down without comment. OR that someone sees the pain and knows it the way you do (you know a brother or sister- one of the mood-struggling many) and share whatever temporary grace they have, with you, lend it to you for a little while and assure you, stating with the kind of authority that only a survivor can summon, that they’ve been where you are, that there IS a way back, and that where you are IS a real thing.

Kate, or anything involving Cole Porter or Busby Berkely or Carmen Miranda. Or listen to something that distantly horrifies or tragedies- there’s no need to borrow misery at this point, seek out comedies and happy endings like the strong necessary medicine they are. Raising Arizona or Moonlighting, don’t ask me why but Nicholas Cage figures largely in this thing. OR if you’re secretly a gay man like I am, go rent Kiss Me Kate, or anything involving Cole Porter or Busby Berkely or Carmen Miranda. Or listen to something that underpins the sadness with company- I know it’s goofy but I love the Smiths and the Cure for times like these- they can remind you of the bittersweetness and symmetry of it all, any voluputary, wistful, longing thing.

Animals are great!

on the art or the idiots in your way, you can go shopping for postcards at the end to satisfy that little acquisition compulsion, you can flip through all their books in the bookstore, etc.

(untitled) By: Permafrost

The random kitten generator (do a google search). needs no explanation- should be prescribed if one cannot actually take care of a real one.

Refusing to watch the news, read the newspaper or otherwise refusing to get involved with any abstract distant horrors or tragedies- there’s no need to borrow misery at this point, seek out comedies and happy endings like the strong necessary medicine they are. Raising Arizona or Moonlighting, don’t ask me why but Nicholas Cage figures largely in this thing. OR if you’re secretly a gay man like I am, go rent Kiss Me Kate, or anything involving Cole Porter or Busby Berkely or Carmen Miranda. Or listen to something that underpins the sadness with company- I know it’s goofy but I love the Smiths and the Cure for times like these- they can remind you of the bittersweetness and symmetry of it all, any voluputary, wistful, longing thing.

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If I had more money I would just go to the movies all the time when depressed. Or at least rent piles of videos. The difficulty being that if I am REALLY down, I can’t move myself out the door to the movie theater. But the basic function of cinema, entertainment, is a powerful drug. And it sure does take my mind off myself. Museums are a GREAT way to kill depression and also fantastic for absorbing manic energy. You can rush around as fast as you want or as slow, and you can talk to yourself and comment on what you’re going through. That can be the equivalent of “I can’t do anything” but being there, being surrounded, being out of the way and allow “it” , me, to re-adjust on its (my) own a bit,..........sometimes a little involuntary

sometimes this is the moment of, “I feel like crap in one way or another and I don’t have to DO anything about it necessarily.” Don’t have to do yoga or hike or eat or call a friend, etc. Sometimes

Sometimes I feel the wisdom of my body knows how to move things through energetically WAAAAAY better than some of these awesome pro-active resources I have and use. Sometimes just laying down and dozing into half awake state or wide awake or asleep....sometimes that feels like I’m giving my system the respect to get out of the way and allow “it” , me, to re-adjust on it’s (my) own a bit,........some times a little involuntary shacking does happen literally. Like my system is wiggling around some of the stuck or the hype and I just can watch. I can receive that help. That innate knowledge of me that I don’t know, as yet, in my conscious mind. Waiting out the Anitcha. Doing absolutely nothing and understanding there’s always something going on, we’re never “doing nothing”. Not feeling guilty about it or worried I’m so depressed, blah blah blah. Just lay down. Allow the shift.

the movies, museums By: eduardo

Animals are great!

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Taking Control of Our Mental Health Part 4: Seeking Treatments that Make Sense to Us

Whether or not people diagnosed with bipolar disorder can keep themselves steady without taking psych drugs is a highly disputed question. The medical establishment’s line on the dilemma is clear; studies prove bipolar people should take meds for the rest of their lives. This can be really hard to swallow. It seems like some of us do manage to find non-pharmaceutical methods of coping; we might pay very close attention to our nutrition, exercise constantly, and/or develop a consistent meditation practice, or we might turn to alternative practitioners for treatments like acupuncture and herbs. Some try these treatments and find that they aren’t sufficient by themselves, but are immensely helpful in addition to psychiatric treatment. The vast majority of us end up trying pharmaceuticals at some point—some of us stay on them for decades, some of us go off them after a few months. Some of us have trouble with side-effects and feel dampened; some of us are unequivocally sure that they infinitely improve the quality of our lives. Because the debate on what works best has so many sides, we want to let the voices of the amazing members of our website speak to you about their experiences so you can decide what makes sense for yourself.

“I used to be a hardcore nature-girl, never considered medications. I’ve suffered a long time undiagnosed and self-berating for “not getting my shit together” and being so devastated when a hypomanic stage would end right when I thought I was all “healed” and “gonna finally be alright.” Whatever your spiritual bent, these days I simply refer to the Herbalists as the Forest Healers and the scientists whipping up my little blue Wellbutrins as the Merlins. It’s all magic to me and my life has vastly improved since opening my horizons to all the options available. Absolutely anything can be over used or under used, over prescribed, under prescribed, over eaten, under eaten. Takes a lot of patience to find the right stuff for each one of us. And then the openness and flexibility to realize once we find some good help, our needs may change.” –dianalupi

One of the hardest things about deciding whether or not to take drugs is the criticism we impose on ourselves and the judgments we fear from others. People who are deciding whether to take or reject drugs are trying to understand how to heal themselves; they are neither weak for “giving in” and taking drugs nor stupid and irrational for questioning them. “whatever helps you feel better- i’ll probably say that so many times i should take the time to learn how to program a shortcut key for it- I couldn’t tolerate meds well in the past and am seeking and investigating alternatives- but whatever helps you live and alleviates the suffering- at a certain point whether it comes out of a brown plastic vial or someone’s mouth or off a tree- you’re worth it - your happiness is probably worth some risk, yes?”-permafrost

Whether the drugs are an evil form of mind control, divine intercession, or something in between is not a simple question to answer. We all experience them differently.
For those of us who can tolerate them, the drugs can retrieve the outside world from its hiding spot behind the machinations of our minds.

“I had so much rage that the real me, the one I liked and understood, had been swallowed up by this swirling gray mess that wouldn’t lift no matter what I did, and I wanted her back.... But she came back. Each time, it’s seemed like forever. Like unending awfulness. But at some point I realized it had ended. The drugs were, to say the very least, an enormous relief. After a few weeks, I could read again. The incessant despair and circular racing of my brain like a hamster on a wheel to nowhere slowed, and eventually leveled out. There was a day when the sunrise was beautiful and gentle and I could sit through the whole thing without fidgeting. A day when I could be patient. A day when there were no voices in my head. When a good apple tasted good. When the sunrise was beautiful and gentle and I could sit through the whole thing without fidgeting. A day when I could be patient. A day when there were no voices in my head. When a good apple tasted good.

Yet it seems to some of us that the drugs are prescribed for all the wrong reasons, and create as many problems as they address.

“...my partner and i really want to have kids, and i want to be the one to be pregnant. i’m on lithium and zyprexa, neither of which are approved for pregnancy, my doctor wants me to quit lithium and stay on zyprexa. anyone have thoughts about that? been there? alternatives?” –daniellefrances

The answers vary because we do not all have the same chemistry. If you look at pharmacology textbooks and the like, you’ll discover that they’re very formulaic when it comes to prescribing medicine: the usual combo is a mood stabilizer + an antidepressant, with only a few variations.

“Patience is key when looking for the right drugs and the right person who actually bothers to keep up on the current research and actually bothers to listen to you as an individual, not a “typical bi-polar” which, as we know from our wide and varied stories, there is no such thing... I tried my 10th shrink and he listened and recognized my particular life-story/ patterns...Started me on Wellbutrin which some psychiatrists would never do because if you’ve ever had a manic episode, they go straight to the mood-stabilizers which can be such DOWNERS for those of us already usually in a down. Wellbutrin doesn’t work on serotonin but the other neuro transmitter, dopamine. Less likely to put someone in mania......within a half hour of popping this thing I didn’t feel like I wanted to die for the first time in months. Just like that. Wow. What we ended up with was Wellbutrin and Ritalin during the day for depression and focus. AND, very important, Klonopin at night for relaxation and focus. AND, very important, Klonopin at night for relaxation and focus. AND, very important, Klonopin at night for relaxation and focus. AND, very important, Klonopin at night for relaxation and focus. AND, very important, Klonopin at night for relaxation and focus. AND, very important, Klonopin at night for relaxation and focus. AND, very important, Klonopin at night for relaxation and focus. AND, very important, Klonopin at night for relaxation and focus. AND, very important, Klonopin at night for relaxation and focus. AND, very important, Klonopin at night for relaxation and focus. AND, very important, Klonopin at night for relaxation and focus. AND, very important, Klonopin at night for relaxation and focus. AND, very important, Klonopin at night for relaxation and focus. AND, very important, Klonopin at night for relaxation and focus. AND, very important, Klonopin at night for relaxation and focus. AND, very important, Klonopin at night for relaxation and focus. AND, very important, Klonopin at night for relaxation and focus. AND, very important, Klonopin at night for relaxation and focus. AND, very important, Klonopin at night for relaxation and focus. AND, very important, Klonopin at night for relaxation and focus. AND, very important, Klonopin at night for relaxation and focus. AND, very important, Klonopin at night for relaxation and focus. AND, very important, Klonopin at night for relaxation and focus. AND, very important, Klonopin at night for relaxation and focus. AND, very important, Klonopin at night for relaxation and focus. AND, very important, Klonopin at night for relaxation and focus. AND, very important, Klonopin at night for relaxation and focus. AND, very important, Klonopin at night for relaxation and focus. AND, very important, Klonopin at night for relaxation and focus. AND, very important, Klonopin at night for relaxation and focus. AND, very important, Klonopin at night for relaxation and focus. AND, very important, Klonopin at night for relaxation and focus. AND, very important, Klonopin at night for relaxation and focus. AND, very important, Klonopin at night for relaxation and focus. AND, very important, Klonopin at night for relaxation and focus. AND, very important, Klonopin at night for relaxation and focus. AND, very important, Klonopin at night for relaxation and focus. AND, very important, Klonopin at night for relaxation and focus. AND, very important, Klonopin at night for relaxation and focus. AND, very important, Klonopin at night for relaxation and focus. AND, very important, Klonopin at night for relaxation and focus. AND, very important, Klonopin at night for relaxation and focus. AND, very important, Klonopin at night for relaxation and focus. AND, very important, Klonopin at night for relaxation and focus. AND, very important, Klonopin at night for relaxation and focus. AND, very important, Klonopin at night for relaxation and focus. AND, very important, Klonopin at night for relaxation and focus. AND, very important, Klonopin at night for relaxation and focus. AND, very important, Klonopin at night for relaxation and focus. AND, very important, Klonopin at night for relaxation and focus. AND, very important, Klonopin at night for relaxation and sleep. So as an alternate story to some of those on here who talk of taking Zyprexa or others to sleep only in manic times, I’m someone who, for the moment takes all three of these as my daily diet and, let me tell you, my metabolism and problems with digestion and eating disorders quieted, my ability to focus, function........amazing how physiological it all really is.”–dianalupi

“It is an almost indescribable experience to watch the workings of our minds change as we introduce new chemicals into our bodies. Sometimes we can think more clearly and consistently then we ever thought possible. Sometimes we feel totally irrational and see the strangest things in our heads. The permutations are truly bizarre. “Since starting lamictal (and trazodone some days to help me sleep), I’ve noticed that sometimes I’m a little tired and my mind “goes to sleep” for a few moments (or half asleep), at which point I have little dream fragments. And I tell you honestly, it’s seeing the machinery of my cognition be partially disassembled: certain wheels are spinning, but they aren’t connected the way they were. It’s literally like that. I have spatial models spinning in my head that normally would be a part of a larger mental machine, but it’s like I’ve taken the motor out or disconnected some belts and the motor is just spinning on its own. It’s accompanied by a dullness and mild confusion.”–NG
Lithium.

I imagine that because lithium is an older medication, it is less refined. Less specific to the target. Now that I have come to the end of my therapy timeline, I feel like I am being prescribed Lithium because it’s just the most simple and “natural” thing to take, etc etc blah blah. Well, I’m some kinda mix of bi-polar two, mixed-states, cyclothymia. The depression is more of a presence than the “highness” in whatever degree it comes, hyper or hyp or pain in the ass enthusiastic and lots of energy before the “fall” comes. Bottom line on my two cents on this subject: lithium was not a match for me. Feel like leaden feet/body Frankenstein monster on the lowest of low doses. I never found everything to be groovy and “happy ending” with lithium like Patty Duke in her autobiography. Well, I was a bit bitter and back to the drawing board.

Lithium has too many side effects by: nova

Lithium did not work for me. Neither did Tegretol (allergic reaction, face and tongue turned numb), Lamictal (wired me into a breakdown), Depakote (worked except for hair loss) Neurontin (wired me up and started force-feeding it to me with a colorful array of other moodstabilizers/antipsychotics/ antidepressants, I had never heard of the drug. I never would have guessed that these tiny little pills would ever be playing such an important role in my life. This coming January it’ll be three years I’ve been on these things, and my life has changed so dramatically in recent years. We all react to the world and to the variables substances we put in our bodies differently, but I don’t believe for a second that lithium has stunted my creativity. I’m more creative than I’ve ever been. And I actually finish things I start these days!

But we’ll see. The flipside is that I hate being dependent on the medical establishment for my stability. I don’t trust the corporate drug companies for a second. Who knows what life is going to look like for me or anyone else in ten years, in twenty years? The whole social/economic system we live under is held together by an emotionally deadening consumer culture that is going to end up destroying us in really ugly and ironic ways unless we figure out better models of living our lives. So we have a lot of work to do. At the moment though, while it’s obviously walking a sketchy line, I’m very happy for my Medicaid card and my little pills.

Lithium Frankenstein experience By: dianalupi

So, I was really stoked on trying lithium because it’s pretty much just a mineral salt. Felt it to be the most simple and “natural” thing to take, etc etc blah blah. Well, I’m some kinda mix of bi-polar two, mixed-states, cyclothymia. The depression is more of a presence than the “highness” in whatever degree it comes, hyper or hyp or pain in the ass enthusiastic and lots of energy before the “fall” comes. Bottom line on my two cents on this subject: lithium was not a match for me. Feel like leaden feet/body Frankenstein monster on the lowest of low doses. I never found everything to be groovy and “happy ending” with lithium like Patty Duke in her autobiography. Well, I was a bit bitter and back to the drawing board.

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There are so many lenses through which we can look at the experiences that get labeled mental illness; one of the more imaginative is shamanism. Shamanism is a tradition found in virtually every primitive society, in every forgotten corner of the world. According to Alberto Mirdita and Eric Nordstrom, the authors of Four Winds: A Shaman's Guidebook into the Amazon, the shaman is a person of knowledge. His or her knowledge is passed between the natural and supernatural forces of nature. Because there were no doctors, the shaman had responsibility for health and disease, the shaman was healer. 

Shamans are people who seem to contact spirits and have access to different realms of reality that the rest of us do not. In traditional cultures this ability was seen as a gift, and it was considered sacred. In modern cultures it is seen as a pathology and resisted. In most non-Western cultures, there is an entire word for what we call mental illness. This word is a small box that doesn't fit all of us, and the words around it is too big and too complicated than what it can describe.

"I insist that I am not insane. I am a shaman without ceremony or training, without a spiritual sect or lineage. As I am moved by the spirit of life that connects me to the rest of the world. I move to my own inner desires, my imagination, but it may differ from the mythical norm. I don't believe in norm. I believe in biology, including that which may be found in the biology of people. It's possible they offer a hope of becoming something more than we are—or perhaps it is a hope of emerging into sanity and seeing our world exactly as it is, in all its dimensions.

We are the people who should have the power to say who we are and of what we are capable. We are people with a dangerous gift that sometimes grants us the vision to see new possibilities and offers the potential of drawing new lines on the map. Drawing new lines on the map requires being critical of the ones that have already been set down—while being realistic about what can and cannot be changed. Drawing new lines on the map requires allowing ourselves free access to our imaginations. It requires the courage to resist authority—and ultimately, the solidarity to do it well.
I flipped my collapse-like emerging out of the dream and allowed it to run.

A man once told me the concept of time and knowledge of good and evil. He said, "Time is a dual-faced beast, and the knowledge of good and evil is a two-sided coin." And God said: "God is the保障 upon your controls. In the world of your conscience, you will be trained until you arrive at the godhead, and all of you will be taken, for desires are not lost but will return."

And so, I thought, "the dream had run and poured at the point of the godhead in the cosmic and the flaming brands of the gods to go until the godhead of the mouse..."

It is such a peculiar sapient," I said. "The emphasis is not man's relationship to his environment, but man's relationship to himself as an organism, lending himself, becoming self-conscious in a cosmic world. The Westerner, accepting his notion, grew in a cultural context and philosophical knowledge, has become an individual and must find his own path."

I supposed what I intended. "You can live your life in any way you wish. It provides a variety of emotional experiences, and an individual can be both a unique and natural. Even in the entertainment we're exposed to, they are commercial, scientific in the sense of science in the other way, and medical in the consumption..."

So, the Westerner, I said. "We can see from the Garden, has grown toward you, and is growing toward you, is then toward you, where the individual becomes a psychological and spiritual being. In this garden, I am toward you, toward you, toward you, toward you, toward you, toward you..."

But, "the continuous," you end up with an entirely different sense of the world. When the reaction of a culture is not in touch with the "filthy" man, man, who was never in touch with the Garden of Eden and lives close to Nature and Nature in a metaphorical sense.

In these cultures, a culture is breaking a metaphysic and is magical. The sooner man understands it, and if the person is magic, who he is, how much he is, and how much he isn't, the sooner man can become a spiritual being. They are relative to experience, which are their own minds, and are conditioned as a result. In many primitive cultures, they become the primitive people. They have understood this being.

I propose nothing of the kind. It would be dangerous to promote such incidents within your culture, because your mythology is based on thousands of years of tradition that each episode is not normal and is unnatural, are unnatural, and are unhealthy. I am merely pointing out a difference. In primitive cultures the meaning of the common is a blessing. It is unusual, yes. But unnatural. These are children of the Earth, the Garden, the Nature, not burdened from it. To such a culture everything is of Nature. Natural. Even a psychological episode. It is safe, especially when guided by one who has had a similar experience..."

Madness is a social distinction," I said. "Precisely." (pp. 18-20)

The Western paradigm of madness is neatly defined and categorized in numbered codes and toed page documents by huge organizations with acronyms and Lobbies in Congress, but it doesn't take organizations and structures like itself into account when deciding who's mad. It looks at people like you and I. As David Oaks, the President of MindFreedom, has observed.

There are different types of madness. Some can cost you a job and break a window and screw things up. Others can get you a job President of the USA. But mad we all are. And that should mean HUMILITY... humility on how we treat each other, and humility on how we treat the Earth. And it should mean society running to the doors of people labeled "seriously mentally ill" who have fully recovered to find out HOW THEY DID IT because, the fact is, those are the lessons the Earth needs desperately right now.

What does it mean to humanize in order to remain cured? Is it possible that sharing what we've been through, all we've seen and all we've learned, might open doors in a society that is rapidly constructing walls around possibility at every turn? Is it possible that the very places of our society that have labeled psychological and also be keys to the lock, there are already blowing free when we aim to make it easy to open? After all, would we be making the imagination leaps necessary to write this book if you're reading it if my hands weren't prone to forming statues, deranged and unusual connections across the swaths of thought, and the "delusions of grandeur" that get labeled symptomatic of disease but also allow me to have a wide open vision that reconsiders the role madness can play in our culture and imagines big possibilities?

The shamans of this world is greatly anticipated in the book, the dead and the living for the original Free of ignorance... by Terence McKenna.

"The eastern part of the shaman's intuition is concentrated on a certain empathy to states of mind and a feeling on the part of the shaman which are not related to the oneness and the oneness are not related to the oneness and the oneness are not related to the oneness and the oneness are not related to the oneness and the oneness are not related to the oneness and the oneness are not related to the oneness...

In short, the shaman is transformed from a primeval into a social being who, thus, not only retains his own turn through that mystical transmission but is now invested, the power of the sacred, and hence can cure others as well. It is of the first order of importance to remember this, that the shaman is more than merely a sick man, or, a madman, he is a sick man who has healed himself, who is cured, and who must humanize in order to remain cured."

(p. 5)
What do the ravings of a madman look like? Are they always incoherent nonsense with little relationship to reality? Or is there a brilliance sometimes an ability to see phenomena as part of larger systems, to recombine the elements of daily existence through linguistic tricks and the unexamined baggage of metaphor into something that allows us to see a continuity between every little piece of dirt and every human bone that is always present in the original surrounding and unrelated truth but is too frequently obscured by the illusion of knowledge we believe to be the collective understanding of reality? The words below were written during a period of what the psychiatric establishment considered insane mania... decide for yourself.

The trick is to be fluid like a river—break down and recreate in new forms with the same elements, removed from their context. The trick is to remember that we grow into new shapes as we mature—like plants going to seed: shooting up and branching out—dying up and exploding, regrowing thicker and more used to it as the years go by—spreading wings and letting loose and never ever the same and never even all the time. You and me, you and I, we stand always out of the same places again, and here we stand in this city of eight million faces continually dissolving and reforming itself—breaking down and building back up; the top and bottom but it's still us and it's us. It's still a city about learning the lessons of these halls in these halls. We're leaving our lives in ruins we're out of time—carrying pockets of seed and everything is just staring everywhere, head and mouth full of ideas and language and this is the living breathing bridge between universes, conduit for the alive force to flow all over us, every living one.

As we walk from macro to micro and back again we teach a form of consciousness for which there is little room in our society. "Because our maps of reality are determined by our present circumstances, we tend to lose awareness of the larger patterns of time and space. Only by getting access to the transpersonal do we have these patterns of time and space and our relation to them be clarified. Shamanism offers a different view of reality, which is achieved through a shift in consciousness. The shaman is one who has an intimate sense of the infinite and the endings of all things and who can communicate it to us." (Food o' the Gods, p.1)

So much of the state of the arts that gets labeled "arts" comes down to communication. We find messages everywhere—we are just as likely to perceive truth coming from the senders on our windowsills and the billboards on our streetcorners as we are from a friend or a television. We want the world to see what we see, to know what we know, whether it's serious or apocalyptic. Our minds are dwelling in a place everywhere is talking to us... but for our whole lives we've been told that things like this only happen in fairy tales and in myths. In other cultures, such states are seen as necessary magic. According to Terence McKenna, the shaman journeys into an invisible realm in which the causality of the ordinary world is replaced with the immateriality of the mythic realm. In this realm, language, ideas, and meaning have greater power than sense and effect. Sympathies, resonances, resonant, and resonant will are linguistically augur through poetic rhetoric. The imagination is invoked and sometimes its forms are held within. Within the mythic mind set of the shaman, the ordinary connections of the world and what we call natural laws are depersonalized or ignored... The natural, mechanistic, and spiritual roots of our own culture have made impossible for us to appreciate the mind-set of the shaman. We are culturally and linguistically blind to the world of forces and interconnections clearly visible to those who have retained the mythical pre-existent and pre-existent relationship to nature. (pp.6-8)

in this society the mystics will always live on the margins

by jack mcnamara

A man named told in the design growing older to a day with electric light and I am a person through something kind of a thing behind the arrow-nosed flounder of some sort and I am channeling it through the medium in his plant and we're talking under a disproportionate amount of sunlight for some reason and he has known me for about 15 minutes and I am feeling myself not feeling some kind of energy through my arm and to feel totally swept away in the phrases and personal I am talking about he looks right in the eyes and his head is like an open funnel isn't it like something goes on the edge of the whole world jumps once you can't keep it out and now that I am thinking that I am very well must be very hard to have a jump on the rest of you, you know. you have to work so much harder to be open and get at the wisdom of things.

A few minutes later the man is talking about the same project and he says... "oh, you're massively depressed, well of course, it all makes more sense now." late we are talking about being given access to visions of the universe, access to visions of the universe and the interconnected nature of love, access to the sense of time and space that allows you to observe what is and is not important, that makes it seem silly to bear death and easy to open your arms to everything you encounter. he is talking about getting access through years of meditation and I am talking about getting access through a few weeks of music—we are talking about where we are and where we are not. we are talking about getting these glimpses before you are ready to hold them in your hand. we're still in the process of learning. the future attempt to keep knowledge in the center of your mind sends you spinning out into the sky or do more work on yourself and try again..."
I wonder often who I could be if I was not born in this version of history.
I have to take medicine to fit all the realities around me in my head without exploding or disintegrating, because I cannot tune them out. I see things and they move, hard, make me read around the globe, make me seek change, make me write furiously to have a place to put all the observations, paint furiously to have a place to put all the awe, and I don’t know how anyone could do it any differently, trying to work at all jobs has always seemed like soul death to me. I can’t imagine wanting to be somewhere else. I am, maybe. I am just young. It’s not all that though. I know plenty of young folks who do just fine with a steady job and a television.

It’s time to draw new lines on the map.

The map is full of boundaries, boundaries that man created. Boundaries that are temporary. Straight lines over curved hills, double lines between people who speak different languages. Blue lines for big roads with no stop signs whose construction requires bulldozing farms and old gas stations, dashed lines for roads that pass by mountains, which are relegated to scenery now at one point they were goddesses.

It is time to know new lines on the map.

The map you need to use with measuring instruments, to map your life with microscopes and lenses. It is also the people who feel that people before them have taken them the right path, we don’t have a way to know it. Don’t ask the path that don’t, don’t let go. It is all about perspective. It is to know new lines on the map. It is about changing the birth of our globe.

We need to imagine we need to imagine a plane that flies a plane on planes of the other side of the earth, we need to imagine a plane on planes of the other side of the earth, we need to imagine a plane on planes of the other side of the earth. We need to imagine a plane on planes of the other side of the earth. We need to imagine the plane on planes of the other side of the earth. We need to imagine a plane on planes of the other side of the earth. We need to imagine a plane on planes of the other side of the earth. We need to imagine a plane on planes of the other side of the earth.

I sit and I write all these words to tell you about being born to become your life. I write about consistency, and being the only one, and being the only one before you got too bad. It is not because we face a society that doesn’t give me music, doesn’t give me a chance to let my music go. It is not because we face a society that doesn’t give me music, doesn’t give me a chance to let my music go. It is not because we face a society that doesn’t give me music, doesn’t give me a chance to let my music go.

I wonder if you ever felt like a mountain was a goddess? Really felt it? I wonder if you ever felt like a mountain was a goddess? Really felt it? I wonder if you ever felt like a mountain was a goddess? Really felt it? I wonder if you ever felt like a mountain was a goddess? Really felt it? I wonder if you ever felt like a mountain was a goddess? Really felt it? I wonder if you ever felt like a mountain was a goddess? Really felt it? I wonder if you ever felt like a mountain was a goddess? Really felt it? I wonder if you ever felt like a mountain was a goddess? Really felt it? I wonder if you ever felt like a mountain was a goddess? Really felt it? I wonder if you ever felt like a mountain was a goddess? Really felt it? I wonder if you ever felt like a mountain was a goddess? Really felt it? I wonder if you ever felt like a mountain was a goddess? Really felt it? I wonder if you ever felt like a mountain was a goddess? Really felt it? I wonder if you ever felt like a mountain was a goddess? Really felt it? I wonder if you ever felt like a mountain was a goddess? Really felt it? I wonder if you ever felt like a mountain was a goddess? Really felt it? I wonder if you ever felt like a mountain was a goddess? Really felt it? I wonder if you ever felt like a mountain was a goddess? Really felt it?
manic depression and spirituality  By: emiko

so does anybody who’s gone psychotic feel that they’ve touched on other dimensions? seen energies? or come closer to the divine?

i’m not so religious, but I believe everyone has an ideology through which they construct and interact with their worlds, and spirituality bleeds into this. so regardless of whether or not we’re spiritual, how does having gone psychotic mesh into our worldview? it seems many feel that we’re just broken, that something is simply and clearly wrong with us, and that any psychotic experience is merely an aberration. perhaps i’m naive, but I believe reality is a “collective hunch,” though necessary for functioning in the world we’ve created. there is much more, in my opinion, than this reality. it could all be in our heads, but the unconscious is full of otherworldly phenomena. i would somehow like to deal with what happened to me (my manic episodes) in a way that doesn’t reduce it to brain chemistry or conventional notions of insanity. am I delusional to think this?

Yes By: MtMan

“So does anybody who’s gone psychotic feel that they’ve touched on other dimensions? seen energies? or come closer to the divine?”

Yes. But then the next question is “so what?”

Once you’ve been there - it’s designed so that you are diagnosed as being crazy, so no one would believe your insights anyways. Plus you can’t stay there - eventually you come crashing down. When this happens you don’t even have the mental clarity or energy to write about what you learned during your enlightenment.

Mania is enlightenment. But there is a cruel joke whereby you’ve been given the gift of mania for a few days, yet afterwards it’s still a big “so what?” because no one will believe your insights anyways. If they find out you’re on medication then you will really be ignored.

communicating with the spirits  By: eduardo

I separate the specific ‘insights’ that may come to me in an extended state of mania from the physical feeling of reaching another realm, and that’s how I avoid the ‘so what.’ A physical feeling of being on the edge of known human existence in relation to birth, death, the planets, whatever, is not a ‘so what’—it’s a pretty cherishable thing. Explanations I may race to, in a conspiracy-theory-style moment, of details and events I may notice as if they form a logic, a sentence with a conclusion, as it were, are something else. Those pretty much have to be pricked with a pin, and yes, they don’t always translate into interesting literature or artwork or what have you....never mind into a cosmological explanation. They might yield points of entry for actual investigations of existing intellectual or spiritual systems, even if through an initial misunderstanding....in any case, while it may be true that a delusional structure we invest belief in while manic mostly turns out to be useless, a feeling of the bareness or sparseness of existence is, I think, not something at which to turn one’s eye. However, you can get there via other means than a BP or other psychotic episode—anaemia or blood loss can do it, or even just a day going well beyond all possible expectation....Extreme physical exertion can do it, as well. I mean here to stress this experience as physical feeling that incorporates where the head goes. The heightened physical sensation of being very alive is probably as close as (I think) we get to the divine, regardless of what the myths are that we receive during that state or in a more ordinary state of reception.

Consciousness Embedded in the Chemistry  By: Ng

I think that all thoughts are made up of brain chemistry and electricity. But that doesn’t take away any of the magic, miracle, and beauty. Somehow, consciousness is embedded in all of that. I am a materialist in that I do think there is “stuff” outside of my body that I am perceiving (I don’t just ‘imagine’ this keyboard and all of you). But still, in a sense I create the world, or at least an interpretation of it, based upon the input of my senses and the complex relationships I assign to different pieces of that input. My spirituality comes to a large degree from the faith that other people and animals also have consciousness. This adds a real spin to the created world in my head, because it means that my vision of the world isn’t just an arbitrary construction—i’m actually communicating with other people... In communion with other spirits.

Doorways  By: icarus

Hey there-- So I’m mostly responding to Emiko’s question if other people feel like they’ve touched other dimensions, seen energies, or become closer to the divine when manic.

Yes. I think so. And while I think that my unique chemistry might have helped me to get to those doorways sooner than I might have without it, I don’t write off those experiences as simply chemical and therefore meaningless, therefore somehow unreal.

When I became manic last fall I was intensely interested in spiritual readings and Buddhism in particular. I’d begun sitting zazen and going to dharma talks and reading all kinds of books and having all kinds of realizations that accelerated the more manic I became. I developed an ability to read a book like Be Here Now or Crooked Cucumber—which I actually find a bit slow and spacey now—and have every detail connect with everything I’d ever experienced in a way that was like lightning—immediate, complete, and electric. Everything I encountered was like that: I distinctly remember sitting in my garden one night at 3 in the morning cause I just couldn’t sleep and talking to god and looking at the little stones I placed around some of my plants that had now moved due to topography and water and immediately drawing the connection that those stones are just like our plans and our intentions that we set in the cosmos and must expect will be shifted by the greater wisdom of the universe... and on and on... and I wasn’t necessarily wrong. I think a lot of the conclusions I came to and places I entered were very real. I don’t think they were delusions. when I go back and reading my journals that at how true my words seem, but I don’t understand how I got there—it was like I had instant access to a distinct awareness of the presence of the Divine in all things, and to a rarefied kind of knowledge I didn’t even know existed before—and the insights were constant and rapid and all-consuming. That’s where I think the chemistry comes in.

But what do I find on the other side of that experience. Is all of it gone? No. While the insights I experienced don’t vibrate daily in my blood with electric certainty, the whole time nonetheless changed me radically and is still with me. And it changed my ability to make art forever. During those months my ability to paint grew about 10 years in 2 months, to the point that old friends and new friends were shocked every time they walked in my room and didn’t always believe I’d made the work myself. A year later i’m still taken aback that this feeling of being able to paint for comes after I left that, seems to have retained the rapid growth and deluge of insights... so who knows.

doorways  By: alpal

to everyone, thank you again. it is extremely nice to be able to speak in this forum, and not feel manic. normal people don’t find anything to discuss out of these topics in my daily life. it is refreshing to hear so much. emiko gracias for starting it out.

i often, almost daily, will have minor episodes where everything seems unreal in a sense. i find everything spiritual, and do believe in a form of spirit. akin to native american ideals of a spirit in the earth, the wind, etc. i also grew up with Quakers who believe that there is that of god in each of us. However, it is more geared toward the kind of “do unto others as others...” thought, and not based in a multi-dimensional world way.

so, i tend to gravitate toward reality. whatever the definition may be. So what... does affect me a lot. I find like mt man that I will have epiphanies I reach where I create something I believe mind boggling and then retreat from that again that seems to be picking up where I left off, that seems to have retained the rapid growth and deluge of insights... so who knows.

mania and spirit  By: alpal

To everyone, thank you again. It is extremely nice to be able to speak in this forum, and not feel manic. Normal people don’t find anything to discuss out of these topics in my daily life. It is refreshing to hear so much. Emiko gracias for starting it out. I often, almost daily, will have minor episodes where everything seems unreal in a sense. I find everything spiritual, and do believe in a form of spirit. Akin to native American ideals of a spirit in the earth, the wind, etc. I also grew up with Quakers who believe that there is that of God in each of us. However, it is more geared toward the kind of “do unto others as others…” thought, and not based in a multi-dimensional world way.

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If you could write the language that we use to discuss "mental illness" what words would you use?

...I can't think of any specific words, it seems a very logical and obvious language, but we haven't done it yet, that's the reason.

Like many other things, "malignant depression" is just a symbol, a container, a way of organizing life so we can communicate. My word created "labels" for a map to use to start, but we can go wherever we choose. It's so simple and confusing at once. Sometimes it feels like both I and the other people's life are more complicated for TEDH.

Bipolar Disorder, it feels disconnected, not right... Structures are good as long as the reality of structure is not support freedom, not to be ourselves. Worth tools, and like money and material possessions, I'm noticing how much more we put value on the symbols rather than what's Real..."--skank

"Disease" is a language, it provides generalized values. To be mentally ill is obviously not something to be desired, unless, of course, you're crazy. See the circular logic of being mentally transformed, to be in the chrysalis preparatory to paradigm change, to be post-catapillar and pre-butterfly, to be looking for wings, to be seeking transformation, to have a good natural nature of receiving transformation, now, that's another thing, one of those shadow- tragic, it's specific, in part because it isn't part.

I have been trained as a writer. In my writing training, the teachers guided us away from the use of descriptive cliches for expanded meaning. Now I think I know why the figures of speech which were transformation and over-sensitization (what I called a major malaise) row, by any other name, would smell as sweet, has become rigid with resistance, and the stuff it comes pressed against a living situation, it does violence to what is alive in the situation, alive, vital, breathing, vulnerable, raw, I call this "a tragic and unfair violence" but I don't mean well, but that some people find this term useful, others will discover an alternate way of framing this de-sensitizing in language--mean.

For me it is an alcoholic use of language that means Theoretically, this is a language we are more comfortable with, because it provides a way to talk about "mental illness" that is more positive--that's my most positive experience of my own lingering mental illness, it involves with that process of depersonalization and transformation not only of substance but of MEANING. That is a different thing from the process of depersonalization and transformation, which suggests that when we use things likening the core of our personalities is unthinkably or exclusively-interrupted, or at any rate is not discovered. There's no question, for example, that relentlessly, obsessively, pervasively one's head into the wall physically or figuratively, or the absence of things that might be taken as signs of severe depression; on the other hand, the fact that one is at all distortedly, monstrously distortly from the validity and relevance of our observations.

Just think when we watch a film come from the dark, and people act all dark and abnormal and on the edge of their minds, and apparently, are out of control, including the lighting, we're well aware that the genre was a reaction to the second world war. In the past, it was 50's, and it's OK to drink about it, and all guns about it, and escape into the night with Lewis Ballad about it. Or, with Richard's, some绚丽 expanded metaphors...When these days, the drama is the bringing of the helpless madman: psycho from darkness into some divine happy light, or not being able to perform sane mean (MMBNL comes to mind...)
I don’t have any alternatives to that word consumer because I fear they’ll come out all ambitious-long-un-European and easy to make fun of like the American middle class. It doesn’t fit my mouth, but it’s the only one that comes to mind. If you’re black, I mean, I can’t think of an alternative. I’d want to hear in the mouths of a doctor or therapist because there’s a certain blackness to it. It’s got a certain blackness to it. It’s got a certain blackness.

Criterias for Manic Episode (DSM-IV, p. 322)

1. A distinct period of abnormally and persistently elevated, expansive, or irritable mood, lasting at least 1 week (or any duration if hospitalization is necessary).
2. During the period of mood disturbance, three (or more) of the following symptoms have persisted (but if the mood is only irritable) and have been present to a significant degree:
   a. Inflated self-esteem or grandiosity
   b. Decreased need for sleep (e.g., feels rested after only 3 hours of sleep)
   c. More talkative than usual or pressure to keep talking
   d. Racing or flight of ideas or experiential speech that is foamy or flighty
   e. Disturbance in goal-directed activity (other than speech) (e.g., at work or school, or in relationships; may be present before dysphoric mood becomes clearly evident)
3. The mood disturbance is sufficiently severe to cause marked impairment in social or occupational functioning or judgment.

Criterias for Mixed Episode (DSM-IV, p. 335)

1. A period of mixed affective symptoms, and a Major Depressive Episode (except for duration) nearly every day during at least a 1-week period.
2. The mood disturbance is sufficiently severe to cause marked impairment in social or occupational functioning or in usual social activities or relationships with others, or to necessitate hospitalization to prevent harm to self or others.

Cytostatic Disorder (DSM-IV, p. 480)

1. This is a disorder of learning and memory that results in a delay in the development of cognitive skills, which is associated with impaired ability to acquire new information or to use previously acquired information in a meaningful way. The delay may be due to a variety of factors, including malnutrition, alcoholism, or head trauma.
2. This disorder is characterized by a delay in the development of cognitive skills, which is associated with impaired ability to acquire new information or to use previously acquired information in a meaningful way. The delay may be due to a variety of factors, including malnutrition, alcoholism, or head trauma.

1. I need money to buy clothes, but I don’t have any. I mean, I don’t have any. I mean, I don’t have any. I mean, I don’t have any. I mean, I don’t have any. I mean, I don’t have any. I mean, I don’t have any.

2. I’m not sure how the city works, but it’s not as bad as I thought. It’s not as bad as I thought. It’s not as bad as I thought. It’s not as bad as I thought. It’s not as bad as I thought. It’s not as bad as I thought. It’s not as bad as I thought.

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To get this reader done we basically shut ourselves away from the rest of the world for two months and camped out in Sasquatch, up in the middle of the woods in the Hudson Valley of New York. (We cannot thank her enough for her home and all her support.) We worked on it every day, usually for a bunch of hours, especially in the last month. The last few weeks we didn’t do anything else. Literally. But we treated ourselves right and used our grant money to pay for good food at the local co-op (even though it was 45 minutes away). We ate more sweet potatoes than you can imagine, lots of kale, kamut pancakes with maple syrup for breakfast and miso soup with tahini and sesame oil for lunch. When we weren’t sitting in front of the computer we were in the kitchen cooking or giving each other back rubs and wandering outside to play in the snow and stare up at the stars in the night sky. We tried our best to keep our manic minds sleeping eight hours a night. And we took care of each other. This has been a really intense experience for both of us - we’ve gotten to know each other really well and we’ve talked so much about our childhoods, our psychoses, our big old dreams, our lost loves, and all our ghosts. We cracked each other up constantly and forevermore will be full of language and jokes that no one else will understand, in the way that happens when two people spend too much time together. And all the crying we did on each other’s shoulders, all the sentences we finished for each other before they had time to leave our mouths—all of that stuff is hidden inside this reader, nestled subtly between the lines even though you might not be able to see it.

This was truly a labor of love.

We want people to learn to take care of themselves so they can be bad-ass beautiful uncomprommising human beings like Sasquatch. We want to build little ladders into the sky and shatter myths—like this one: You can’t be creative on Lithium. Wrong. We created this entire reader in 2 months, worked at it feverishly and with ever expanding levels of understanding and an unbelievable current of ideas flowing—and we are both on Lithium, and a couple other drugs between us. This is the most sustainably creative we have ever been. Both of us agree wholeheartedly that this is the most amazing thing we’ve ever done in our lives. And it never would have happened if we didn’t try so hard to be good to our bodies and souls.

Although we’re ambitious, there are lots of things that are not in this reader because our superhuman powers seem to run out after midnight. We’re already thinking about everything we need to get in the next version… hopefully a real book… but first we need to find time and money to print it. So e-mail us your ideas of what we should include and fix. And if you think this project is worth it, help us figure out how to get the support to make that happen. This printing is 1000 copies and we’re going to photocopy the rest ourselves as we go along.

There are so many people to thank we cannot even hope to cover them all, but we’ll try. First off, Anita Altman for support at every step, and Gil Kulick for being good to her and good to us. We could never have done this without the help of The Dobkin Family Foundation and FJC. The website itself would not be usable if weren’t for Ryan Johnson, world’s most interesting webmaster and Jacks’ much loved friend (no matter how much we drive each other nuts…). Thanks for last minute psychological guidance from Jennifer Bleyer and Elizabeth Wayne. Thanks to those who sheltered us on our weekend trips to the city: Jennifer Bleyer, Todd and Eva, Arrow and Kat and Felix, Sarah Quinter, many more to come… Thanks to Todd Chandler for computer help and a fabulous soundtrack. Julie Holland was our unofficial theme music for the winter. Fountain House has provided enormous inspiration, as have innumerable books and websites and magazines. Thanks to all the people who have taken care of us when we’re in bad places—Jacks sends a huge thank you to her because we used her art all over—on this page as a matter of fact. “Blue Jay Way” is from John Ellis’ zine Half-Wild. “Mania,” on p. 25, is from Dalia’s zine Open 24 Hours—

Sweet Potatoes and Little Ladders in the Sky: Thanks and Explanations
It is Spring 2006, and I am and McNaughton, and I self-published the first 1000 copies of this barely-proofread zine/ book/project, three years after a conversation we held on distracted self-published journal articles, as well as many other books believed to be a mental health guide. We’ve contributed to this conversation by publishing stories of our own mental health and the context that shapes it. We created the first version of this book in a maniac spirit of compiling all the stories we had been trying to share and getting back all the paradoxes and insights we had been gathering along the way. After reading through those pages I am left with a sense of inspiration and isolation, the bipolars as a brilliant, aligned character struggling against society and his other potentially inevitable, biological malady. I am amazed by the lack of attention we paid to the transformative experiences of childhood, family, environment, mental crisis, addiction, race, class, and privilege. I am struck by our abundant independence, our deep mistrust of authority, and our fear of our own insanity. Our framework for representing our emotions extremes ranges from we were at the time we wrote this: two privileged, creative, educated white kids who had access to the mental medical care and others who struggled with the same haunting stories of consciousness. Our response to the conventional medical framework of “sickness” was shaped more by our reactions to authority than by an identification with alternative understandings shared by our peers or developed by our elders. Our task was a lack of internal resistance to the diagnostic and treatment mandates of the mental health system. After a few years, the substances we consumed, the trauma we endured, the relationships we developed, and much of anything else.

Since then, we have learned so much more about all the different ways people experience mental and mental crisis. We have a better understanding of how we can use our experience to help others who are also struggling. When you are in the midst of a crisis, it can feel like there is nowhere to turn. The book is divided into three parts: a collection of stories from people who have lived with bipolar disorder, a series of interviews with people who have spoken about their experience, and a section on how to get help. The stories are organized by theme, such as medication, family, and personal transformation. The interviews provide insight into how people have coped with their disorder, and the section on getting help offers resources and tips for seeking support. The book is a valuable resource for anyone who is looking to understand bipolar disorder and find ways to cope with its challenges.
Other Icarus Project Publications

Since the publication of Navigating the Space Between Brilliance and Madness in 2004, members of The Icarus Project have collaborated on numerous books and videos, including the 3 highlighted in the next two pages. All are available for free download on our website, or can be ordered from AK Press. Please help get the word out by buying your own copies, giving them to your friends, donating copies to your library, asking your local independent bookstores to carry them, blogging about them, writing reviews, organizing reading groups, sharing them with your healthcare practitioners, and suggesting them to your professors. We are always open to feedback and suggestions - email us at info@theicarusproject.net.

Harm Reduction Guide to Coming Off Psychiatric Drugs

This guide brings together the best information we’ve discovered and lessons we’ve learned at The Icarus Project and the Freedom Society. It is not intended to persuade anyone to stop taking psychiatric medications, but instead aims to educate people about their options if they decide to explore going off.

Mindful Occupation: Rising Up Without Burning Out

Last year, a group of us who have years of experience practicing peer-based community mental health support got together to compile a manual for organizers and participants in the Roccuppy movement. This is what came out of our work.

We believe that there is an urgent need to talk publicly about the relationship between social injustice and our mental health. We believe that we need to start redefining what mental health actually means to be mentally healthy, not just on an individual level, but on collective, communal, and global levels.

We know that many people at Occupy sites around the country are struggling to figure out how to build spaces of support and healing. We also know that police violence and the stresses of street protest can have very real mental, emotional, and energetic effects that are all too often not taken seriously.

Our aim with this booklet is to stimulate discussion, raise awareness, provide support, contribute to maintaining a more sustainable movement, and lay the foundation for the next stage of the movement. We want it to be a living document, open to revisions and remakes. We also hope this helps start conversations. Many people are doing amazing healing work within and around the Occupy movement – street medics, health professionals, community workers, herbalists, energetic medicine practitioners, radical therapists and social workers, and others. We want to facilitate more discussions and get the word out about more good practices and techniques.

Gathering Preramble

As a group of people inspired by the Icarus Project, we offer this preramble as a tool for your gatherings. You can summarize or read the preramble out loud when you begin your meeting, to create a safe space to start the movement. We want it to be a living document, open to revisions and remakes.

Welcome everyone to our Icarus Project local gathering!

The Icarus Project envisions a new culture and language that resonates with our actual experiences of ‘mental illness’ rather than trying to fit our lives into a conventional framework. We see our madness as a dangerous gift to be cultivated and taken care of, rather than as a disease or disorder needing to be “cured” or “overcome.” Icarus is a space for people to come together and learn from each other’s different views and experiences of madness. People who use psychiatric drugs and people who don’t welcome here. People who use diagnosis categories to describe themselves are welcome here, as are people who define themselves differently. The foundation of the Icarus Project is self-determination and mutual support. Our gatherings have some basic agreements to ensure inclusion, safety, and open dialog:

1. We ‘listen like allies.’ We respect a wide diversity of choices and perspectives, even when we disagree, and we don’t judge or invalidate other people’s experiences.
2. We recognize that overcoming depression helps everyone’s liberation; it is the group’s responsibility to challenge racism, classism, sexism, ageism, homophobia, and other forms of prejudice.
3. To create trust we respect confidentiality. Individual groups set their own parameters around anonymity and sharing information.
4. As you are meeting, keep in mind that there are people all over gathering like this and building community support networks with a vision of a new world. You Are Not Alone!

Forming Local Mutual Aid Groups

This is the guide most folks use to start local Icarus groups. It’s been downloaded over 25,000 times by people all over the world. It contains practical information on how to put on events, facilitate meetings, create a warm and safe atmosphere, get conversation going, and keep people coming back. Here’s an excerpt:

Society puts up walls around “mental illness.” Labels and language, fear and shame, isolate us from each other. Without a voice of our own and spaces for ourselves, we rely on authorities and the media to define who we are. The Icarus Project’s goal is to break down mainstream culture’s walls and concrete to reclaim our experiences, so that a new vision of who we are and what we can become will take root and flourish.

We can organize events filled with inspiration and creativity, plan actions that demand change, educate our allies, share skills and resources, and help each other feel less alone. It is up to us to define what we experience in words that make sense, and to create support that meets our needs. In this laboratory of resistance we can discover new ways of thinking and relating, and begin to participate in our own liberation.

Because we struggle with the extremes of madness, we often have intense empathy and sensitivity towards others: the gift of a big heart and a lot to give. Living through the “damaged” dysfunctional psychiatry system can also mean that you become the Wounded Healer: a person who’s survived the fire and comes out the other side with stories to tell and skills to share. If we can get past our fears and anxieties, it us, not the psychiatrists and professionals, who have the knowledge and ability to connect through our pain and communicate with each other.

Forming Local Support Groups

People are incredibly hungry for creative, empowering discussion and story-sharing around mental health from a non-mainstream view. We are continually amazed by the tremendous response every time we hold an Icarus Project workshop or event. Once you take the first step and spread the word, people will come. Don’t let fear or inexperience stop you. By taking the initiative, other people will be encouraged to get involved because it will touch their lives and reach through their isolation. Even if you’ve never organized a public event or discussion before, you can still start an Icarus group in your community!

Image Credits: Sarah Quinter, inside front cover. Dr. Seuss dictionary, pages 2, 33, 34, 19, 45, 51, 57, 60. Dalia Shevin p. 7, 81. Becky Cloonan, p. 38. Sophie Crumb, p. 50. Tirz Trip, small door p. 53, Geena, the dream person p. 53. Bev’s p. 74. Jack McMahan p. 3, 7, 12, 73, 80, and many more odds and ends. Big 10th edition thanks to Traci Prichard our generic proofreader. Amy and Gi for once again allowing us to use their home in final this booklet. All the artists that have included new art to this edition and made us feel Icarus over the years. Everyone who’s used this guide in their reading groups and given us feedback to make it better. To all the members of The Icarus Project, especially those of you who have stepped up to help by moderating forums, facilitating groups, organizing events, distroing publications, becoming friends, keeping each other alive.
VOICES FROM UNCHARTED TERRITORIES

We have yet to create a reasonable language to talk about "madness". Those of us who do talk about it end up with all of these sterile and clinical words in our mouths that feel uncomfortable, never get to the heart of things and very often skirt around the important issues. When it comes down to it, as a culture we don't understand mental illness so for the most part we leave the opinions up to the doctors and the drug companies.

Like many other things, "manic depression" is just a symbol, a container; a way of organizing life so we can communicate. My uncle compared "labels" to a map - gives us a place to start, but we can go wherever we choose. It's so simple and confusing at once. Sometimes it feels like both I and the other people in my life see me as having this THING, Bipolar Disorder, it feels disconnected, not right... Structures are good as long as we realize the purpose of structure is to support freedom, not to box ourselves in.

I've gone through various periods of craziness and relative normality, feeling like the mental health profession was alternately the source of all evil and the enforcer of all systems of control, my personal messiah, and the sweet little angel who delivered the pink pills that made my stomach crazy and brain finally quiet. What I know for sure is that medication has, at various points, made it possible for me come out of dark ugly places I couldn't leave on my own and regain the stillness to do things like read, things that are fundamental to my existence and are obliterated by this illness when it gets really bad. I know, though, that medicine changes me, and that there are certain parts of what the medical profession calls "illness" that seem indigenous to my soul and entire way of being.

Our society still seems to be in the early stages of the dialogue where you're either "for" or "against" the mental health system. Like either you swallow the antidepressant ads on television as modern-day gospel and start giving your dog Prozac, or you're convinced we're living in Brave New World and all the psych drugs are just part of a big conspiracy to keep us from being self-reliant and realizing our true potential. I think it's really about time we start carving some more of the middle ground with stories from outside the mainstream and creating a new language for ourselves that reflects all the complexity and brilliance that we hold inside.