

## Liz's Story

Hi, my name is Liz and I'm bipolar. No, that doesn't mean I swing both ways, and it doesn't have anything to do with Antarctica either. I've been in the Linden Centre in Broomfield more times than I've changed my knickers!... Well, Ok, that sounds really bad, cos I do change my knickers quite often, but you get the idea!

Some of you may have seen the current advertising campaign about mental health, called Time To Change. I want to support this campaign, and help people understand how mental health problems can affect anyone – 1 in 4 people will experience some kind of mental health problem in their lifetime, which is a pretty sobering thought. The campaign aims to help people change their attitudes to mental health issues. After all, everyone accepts they may break a leg – developing a mental health issue is just as much a possibility.

The aim of this article is to enlighten you about some of the ways in which someone with bipolar can be affected. I want to make it clear that it is not my intention to make light of mental health issues – far from it – the issues themselves are very serious. However, humour has always been an important part of my character, so my story is told with humour, because that is who I am.

My story starts in 2002. I was having a tough time in a relationship with a control freak, and my female boss at work was constantly undermining me – so it was only natural for me to want to let off steam, right? I was drinking a lot, especially at weekends. I was getting pretty down with all the stress and gradually reached rock bottom. I couldn't stop crying, and generally felt like crap. My sister took me, unwillingly, to the doctor who prescribed Prozac in November 2002. I did then start getting better, but thought it was more to do with the fact Xmas was coming up (I've always loved presents!) and I could also see an end in sight for the relationship. I was still being bullied at work, but at least there was light at the end of the tunnel.

Things just got better and better for me at the beginning of 2003, and by April I'd split up from my boyfriend, got promoted at work, moved in with a good friend, and got the nose job I'd always wanted! The split from my boyfriend felt like release from prison and I just went from strength to strength, I thought I could conquer the world... Unfortunately for me, that wasn't just a phrase, I genuinely thought I could conquer the world! This high gradually built up into full blown psychosis until I thought I was invincible – I thought I could literally stop a train. I became very religious during my breakdown and believed Robbie Williams was the saviour and that I was Jesus' sister and could make things happen just by thinking them. I knew that I had to build up a team of disciples to help me spread the word, and was convinced everyone else would see that I was right. This time when I saw a GP I was immediately referred to a specialist care worker, who sectioned me for my own safety. (Now I look back I can see why, I mean, Robbie Williams the saviour??!!). That was the first time I went to the Linden Centre.

At the Centre I was seen by a panel of five doctors, which was a bit like being in one of those awful job interviews, not that they phased me of course, I knew I was right and they were wrong. They diagnosed me as bipolar and injected me with a cocktail of drugs to bring me back to "normality". I

spent two months in hospital and unfortunately the drugs they gave me brought me too far down. I lost the will to live and stopped eating. As a result of all this I lost my home with my friend, lost my car and my job was in jeopardy. When I left hospital I had to move back in with my parents and spent two weeks just staring at a tree outside my bedroom window. It wasn't even a very interesting tree. I didn't eat, and I didn't wash – it felt as if a black cloak had been pulled over my head which cut out all the light.

My Mum was fantastic – every day she would hold my hand and talk to me, promising me I would get better. At first I didn't believe a word of it, but gradually the message started getting through and I did indeed get better. But it took 6 months for me to really feel ready to face the world again. My step-dad was also fantastic – he was with me every step of the way; a real support.

During my euphoric state, before going into hospital I'd met a lovely guy, who stuck by me during all the shit – hospital, depression, the works, and in November 2003 I moved in with him. Then in January 2004 I went back to work part-time – I was finally getting my life back on track.

Although officially work was really flexible and supportive, I was aware that everyone around me was walking on eggshells every time they had to deal with me. True, I did find it hard to concentrate at first, but despite my position I was given really menial work to do. Then, after a while the boss who had previously bullied me started to question everything I did and put me down again. After two months of it I thought, “sod this, life is too short” and walked out. Around the same time I split up from my boyfriend, as he was fed up with the boozing and the lifestyle I had with him.

However, once again I started to drink, and got back into my old ways. I had another episode in the April of 2004, although this time I wasn't hospitalised. I had started seeing a really great guy, who could read the signs of the episode building up, and was able to calm me down quite effectively. During this episode I tried to book a couple of stretch limos to take me and some of my friends from Chelmsford to the Ivy restaurant, a celebrity hangout and notoriously difficult to get a table. I hadn't booked, cos obviously when they saw it was me, they would make room, wouldn't they?! I also decided that I was on a beautiful deserted beach somewhere, and stripped off all my clothes and walked down to the water. Unfortunately, I was really in my flat in Chelmsford at the time and actually walked two storeys down the communal stairwell, naked! Luckily my boyfriend turned up, and was able to persuade me it had started raining on this gorgeous tropical beach, so I'd better get inside again!

I know some people believe that it is wrong to support these delusions, but the problem you are faced with when talking to someone who is delusional, is that they just won't believe it if you try and tell them they are imagining it. It's better to question and try and rationalise as to why they are thinking that way and see whether you can help.

I'd got a pretty good CV and was able to get another job quickly, so by end of September 2004 I had a great job as a PA to the MD and Finance Director in an office furniture sales company, and life was looking rosy. Thing is, when you're bipolar and life is going well you tend to forget you have the disorder. I kept forgetting to take my medication and went back to my old ways - going out at the

weekend, drinking , not sleeping properly and generally having a great time! ! I was also convinced that I was Queen Elizabeth the Third! Inevitably, in May 2005 I relapsed.

I completely went off on one at my new job – told them I knew they talked about me behind my back, but that I didn't care, as the company was a load of shit anyway (nothing like speaking your mind is there?!).

By this time I was really hyper, my psychiatrist came to see me and I started talking in French to him... only problem is I've never studied French in my life and wouldn't know a "comment allez-vous" from a kick up the arse! (By the way, before you write in, my friend helped me with that bit!) The fact that I was speaking complete gibberish didn't hold me back though – I knew I could speak any language in the world, so a bit of French wasn't a problem. I was convinced I had special powers – move over Wonder Woman, Liz is here! While this was going on, the psychiatrist had called in the boys in blue. I was then arrested for being a danger to myself.

Unsurprisingly I was taken back into hospital. I was so super-confident and wound up that it took 6 nurses to hold me down while they injected me. I am by no means a big woman – about 5'8", and a size 10, so you can imagine what state I must have been in for it to take 6 of them. People talk about getting superhuman strength in certain situations; well that's how I can get during an episode. I have no self-control, and don't give a f\*ck about the consequences, because I know I'm in the right. Of course when I come back down again it's another matter. I used to get really upset about it but I have had to come to terms with the fact it's not my fault, it's the illness, so I've learned to accept it (it's not always easy though)

For instance, during that episode I said to my brother-in-law, "you do realise I fell in love with you the moment I saw you?"!! Completely untrue, but understandably he was pretty freaked out about it!

I was in hospital this time for only a week – I was woken by a woman banging on my door and shouting that she was going to kill me. Yeah, pleasant. The next day I discharged myself.

I was made redundant from the furniture company shortly after coming out of hospital – after my outburst I wasn't exactly shocked by the news. I got a temp job with the council and gradually I started to get better.

I stayed with that boyfriend for quite some time, and things were going really well. I got a temporary contract with the Army Cadet Corps in early 2006, but a couple of months later I had another episode. I don't remember much about it because of all the drugs they gave me that time, but it was the worst episode I had had. I got very paranoid and was convinced that I was being watched, and that all my family was being bugged. I didn't dare go to sleep, because I knew that Freddy Kruger (from Nightmare on Elm St) would come to get me. Of course, not sleeping just made the paranoia and delusions worse. I even turned against my boyfriend, and told the police that he was going to kill my parents, by decapitating them. I also said that my best friend and I were lesbians and I was the daughter of Jesus.

I also told everyone I was going to win the lottery – it's a recurring belief I have, when I have an episode, that I am going to become a multi-millionaire. This time I wanted to watch the lottery draw on telly to see my numbers come up, but for some reason it wasn't on, and they were showing an old episode of "The Vicar of Dibley". At one point during the show they were joking about chopping someone's head off, and with my current delusion about my (by then ex-) boyfriend planning on killing my parents I realised that I was being sent special messages through the TV..... You guessed it, back to hospital for me. I then absconded (not for the first time) and went to the police station to give a statement about my boyfriend, and his plans to kill my parents. The police by this stage were familiar with me, and luckily didn't take any action against my boyfriend and did take me back to hospital. My poor ex-boyfriend – he really did put up with a lot.

I spent the next few weeks recovering and then I got a temp job at a financial services company in the City, despite the fact that I had got a really poor reference from the Army Cadet Corps. (They said they wouldn't employ me again due to the amount of time I had had to take off sick.) I met a new guy and told him early in the relationship about my condition. He was really supportive, and went ballistic when I started to drink again. I realised this time what a downward spiral I was headed on, and decided to cut out alcohol and cigarettes altogether. I also started to eat more healthily and generally take care of myself more.

The company I was temping with offered me a permanent job, and after some soul searching I decided to be honest with them about my condition. Luckily they were prepared to give me a chance, and in January 2007 I became a permanent employee.

I had nearly two years without an incident, and really felt that I had everything "under control". I slowly reduced my medication, and started taking homeopathic remedies instead, to supplement my healthy new lifestyle. Then, in October 2008 things started to go pear shaped. I was worried about my sister, who wasn't well at the time, and I wasn't sleeping properly. I started to feel that spirits were talking to me (I've always been a believer in spirits and angels) and one night even saw George Best and Charlton Heston together! They were giving me the thumbs up, so I must have been doing something right...!!!

I then started getting panic attacks – something I've suffered from over the years. I went to see my sister for reassurance. She had been helping me by giving me head massages, and generally helping me to stay calm. This time, however, the head massage triggered a massive panic attack – I literally felt as if she's resuscitated me after drowning – I was gasping for breath and was really scared. I felt as if the spirits I'd felt were somehow channelling through me, and helping me to stay alive.

She helped me calm back down and it seemed that I had the episode under control. That night my boyfriend and I stayed with her and her family, but I found it difficult to sleep. I turned off the light in the lounge, but there was a light on in the hall. I felt it was a sign for me – was I going to choose the dark side with demons, or the light side with the angels? Then I flipped. I went upstairs and found my sister with her two daughters. I was convinced that my sister was Myra Hindley and started screaming at her to get away from the children, calling her a whore and other choice phrases. She started crying and that only wound me up more – to me it proved she was guilty.

I ran downstairs and out into the street. I was screaming that they had taken my kids, and for someone to call the police. A man walked past me, taking his pit-bull for a walk and I bent down and kissed the dog full on the lips. The man's face was a picture! Then my boyfriend arrived, and I started screaming, "that's him, that's who's got my kids" The poor man with his dog didn't know what to do! I then ran up to the main street, and ran into Tesco's. I was shouting and begging them to lock the doors, to stop "them" getting me, and then I switched tone completely and started telling everyone it would be Ok, cos Robbie Williams was my saviour and he would come and rescue me. I turned to a girl trying to get past me with her baby and asked her who she wanted to be with. She was just trying to get past me but after I'd asked a couple of times, and wouldn't let her past, she said "Brad Pitt" I assured her I could make it happen – after all, don't forget I'm Liz!!

Then I flipped again, and started screaming at her, at which point she started to throw punches at me (I later found out that I'd been insulting her child, I didn't realise this at the time). Her boyfriend then arrived and got me in a headlock, which really hurt, until the police arrived. The relief was overpowering, as I was in a lot of pain, and really scared. The police were fantastic, and did a great job of calming me down.

They then took me to the St Christopher secure unit at Broomfield, where I had to wait for 4 hours to be seen by a panel of 3 doctors. The two police officers stayed with me the whole time as at this point I was definitely considered to be a risk to myself and/or others.

The doctors assessing me started asking the usual questions, which instantly got my back up. I began challenging them, asking them if they had seen my file (by now about 3 inches thick!), or knew anything about my condition. It was clear that they didn't know anything about me, and when I realised one of them was actually falling asleep I lost it completely. I clicked my fingers and told him to "wake up and pay attention!" One of the other doctors was Indian and I totally dismissed him, saying I couldn't understand a word he was saying cos he was clearly speaking to me in a foreign language. During an episode I will say anything to anyone, whether I mean it or not – I just don't care about consequences, or the effect it might have on them.

I was then given an injection, which I accepted without a fight, and they put me in the Finchingfield ward with other patients for the night. However, for some reason, one of the ground floor windows opened fully (they usually have limited access and only open a little bit to allow fresh air in), so I climbed out and then walked towards home across the fields in my flip flops. Bearing in mind this was November you would think someone might think that was a bit odd, especially as I was still pretty heavily sedated from the drugs they gave me, but even when I stopped at a pub (appropriately "The Angel"! ) for a drink of water no-one asked me if I was alright, or asked me what I was doing.

I got to my friend Nick's house and luckily he was home. He took one look at me and put his arms around me and cuddled me. He got me inside and lay me down to sleep. He knew about my condition, but had never witnessed an episode before. When I asked him later why he'd hugged me (not normally something he would have done!) He said I just looked so vulnerable that it was instinctive to protect me. Nick – you are a lovely man!

Not long after I'd settled down the police arrived to take me back to hospital. I went without a fuss and stayed on the secure ward for 3 days. It would have been shorter, but I was there over a weekend when they did not have the doctors available to assess me as fit for discharge. I am sure that my quick recovery was due to my healthy lifestyle - cutting out the drink really helped me for sure. Work have been incredibly supportive – I was out of the office altogether for 6 weeks and went back at the beginning of the new year, part-time for the first couple of weeks just to get back into the swing of things, but full time since mid January 2009.

Since then my life has changed again, mainly in terms of my relationships with people around me. I've split up from my boyfriend. He was amazingly supportive, but ultimately he couldn't cope with being my carer, he never gave me a chance to explain or try to understand. My relationship with my family is different too – I've changed and I'm not sure how easy that is for them to accept. I don't call my sister every day or so like I did before. I feel I need to get on with things on my own. I've got lots of plans for the future – I want to write a book on my experiences, and open a non-alcoholic bar in Chelmsford (business backers gratefully accepted!) I'm currently grabbing life by the balls, and fully intend to make the most of every opportunity thrown at me.

I have learned that stress can be a major factor in triggering an episode, as well as lack of sleep. Your brain needs sleep to assimilate and process data from the day's activities. If you overload it, it malfunctions – like a computer crashing.

It is also really important that people around me are aware and understand my condition. A lot of people who have mental health conditions feel incredibly isolated – which can often be worse than the condition itself. It also doesn't help if people are judgemental and negative thinking – constantly being told you can't do something can seriously affect someone's mental health. If you have people around you who can talk you down (or up) that's a massive boost. Try to help those with mental health problems see they are not alone. Try to persuade them to get professional advice – friends and family can be a real help, but they will need to get proper diagnosis, and possibly medication/other treatment.

Keep in mind that having a mental health problem is just one part of the person. People shouldn't be defined by their mental health problem. One myth is that people who have mental health problems are incapable of producing good quality work, or even work at all. This is simply not true - I have managed to hold down a job as a PA for two and a half years, and bearing in mind I work for a financial services firm in the City that had two rounds of redundancies last year, I must be doing something right for them to keep me on.

I want everyone to remember is that I am still me – I have a vibrant and outgoing personality, I love spending time with family and friends and doing all the "normal" things in life – it's just that my brain can get overloaded and go haywire. It could happen to anyone. I want people to learn from my mistakes – for instance alcohol affects moods in a really big way, and for anyone with a tendency to extremes of mood (such as those with bipolar) this is a real no-no. I really don't want anyone to have to go through what I've gone through.

I guess being bi-polar is a bit like living in Tornado Alley in the US – you never know when the next one is going to strike! As long as I have support from friends and family I know I will be OK, and hopefully with a healthy lifestyle, eating and sleeping properly staying off drink, and continuing to use homeopathy in conjunction with my medication I can reduce the number and intensity of episodes I may have in the future (or hopefully even avoid having one altogether).

I hope you have learned something by reading my story, and I hope you will keep an open mind about mental health issues in the future. Remember – it's the everyday things that can make a huge difference.