

## Jess, 24

### Uni student & sales assistant who has shown symptoms of bipolar disorder since childhood, SYDNEY

University student and sales assistant, Jess, 24, began to show symptoms of bipolar disorder as a child. It was not however, until her late teens, that she was officially diagnosed with the illness.

With her mental health in steep decline from 14 years of age, Jess started to self-harm, which led to a diagnosis of melancholic depression at the age of 16.

Jess' depression and anxiety led to her withdrawal from school in year 11. Fortunately for Jess, her family rallied around her, offering her much-needed support to wage a strong fight against her mental illness.

After spending years in a futile struggle to find an anti-depressant that worked for her, Jess, then 19 years of age, visited a new psychiatrist in 2013, who subsequently accurately diagnosed her illness – she was in fact, living with bipolar disorder and anxiety, rather than depression. This new diagnosis set Jess on a more targeted treatment path.

Jess suspects she developed bipolar disorder from the genetic make-up she inherited from her mother's side of the family. She is participating in the *Australian Genetics of Bipolar Disorder Study* in order to shake off the stigma associated with the illness, and to provide others, particularly those in the early stages of bipolar disorder, with much-needed hope.

This is Jess' story.

"Throughout my life, I've exhibited many symptoms and had various experiences that were definitely related to my bipolar disorder, even as a child. I have struggled with anxiety my entire life, and for as long as I can remember, that was the first real indicator of any serious, underlying mental health issue," said Jess.

At 14 years of age, Jess was self-harming and displaying an array of mental health-related symptoms, from severe anxiety, mood swings, insomnia, low motivation, and fatigue, to memory loss, tension headaches, isolation, suicidal thoughts, poor appetite and hypomania. By 16 years of age, Jess was diagnosed with melancholic depression.

"My illness affected every aspect of my personal, and family life. My depressive state and high levels of anxiety forced me to withdraw from high school at the start of Year 11. As the second of four siblings, my brother and sisters had to adjust to a world in which my parents focused entirely on me, and my treatment.

"My family were determined my illness would not shatter us, and that we would unite, as a team, to learn how to better understand, and cope with what I was going through," Jess said.

"Over the years, my siblings have offered me unwavering support. They even maintain they've become better people from learning how to help and support me with my mental health issues.

"My parents were unstoppable in seeking knowledge and treatment to help me reach my full potential. But things could have easily gone the other way, as the illness destroys many lives," said Jess.

After trialling multiple anti-depressants, Jess was unable to identify a treatment that worked for her.

"The battle to find stability in my life and an effective treatment for my illness began when I was 16 years of age. Three years later, after meeting a new psychiatrist, who I continue to see to this day, I finally received a revised diagnosis of bipolar disorder and anxiety.



“By then, it had become highly apparent that I had failed to secure symptom relief and stability in my life for so many years due to my misdiagnosis of depression. It was then clear I was living with bipolar disorder and anxiety, which required effective, tailored treatment,” said Jess.

Living with bipolar disorder was both a blessing and a curse for Jess.

“No two people experience bipolar disorder the same way. However, the illness is both the best and worst thing that has happened to me. Many people say they wouldn’t change their experience with bipolar disorder, and that it has made them a better person, and I completely agree with them.

“I take bipolar disorder one step at a time. You have to be kind to yourself, even when your mind is telling you the opposite. Every day offers a valuable life lesson and it’s important to remember that perfection does not exist,” Jess said.

Jess’s path to managing her bipolar disorder has not however, been without its obstacles. By trialling various treatments and through sheer hard work, Jess has reached a stage at which she no longer feels like she is “treading water”.

“Treatment for bipolar disorder is complex. It must be long-term, supportive, collaborative and holistic. I have been under the care of GPs, psychologists, psychiatrists, naturopaths, spiritual healers, dietitians, endocrinologists, dermatologists, occupational therapists, and disability support educators to date, all of whom have been working to support my mental health.

“When I’m in need of extra support or going through an episode, I take certain precautionary measures and adjust my medications or their dosage, to assist. I visit a psychologist, if required, to aid my anxiety and to help organise my life, when even the smallest things become hard. I also see my doctor every week when I need extra help,” said Jess.

“To maintain good mental health, I need to be as active as possible, eat well, get enough sun exposure, take my medications daily, and have enough sleep, but not too much. It’s good for me to be with my family and friends, and to be kind to myself, because life doesn’t change overnight.”

Jess currently spends time at university and with her loved ones. She is encouraging Australian adults who have been treated for bipolar disorder to volunteer for the *Australian Genetics of Bipolar Disorder Study* – a ground-breaking, international collaboration exploring the genetic risk factors associated with the illness and how genes influence one’s response to treatment. QIMR Berghofer Medical Research Institute is leading the Australian arm of the study, and Jess genuinely hopes her contribution will allow experts to unravel some important answers to help treat bipolar disorder.

“My family and I strongly believe the genes for bipolar disorder have come from my mother’s side of the family. Nothing significant happened to me, or my environment, when I was growing up. There was no clear trigger. I led a healthy, happy and privileged childhood with my three siblings and loving family,” Jess said.

“I have chosen to volunteer for the *Australian Genetics of Bipolar Disorder Study* to help others, particularly those who have just been diagnosed with the illness. I want to shake off the stigma of this illness and to let people know that there is hope, and that bipolar disorder can be effectively managed. It’s not all doom and gloom, and there is light at the end of the tunnel. It’s all about balance and self-care.”

*Should you or a loved one be grappling with a mental health issue, and require support, contact the organisations below without delay.*

*Lifeline – 131 114*

*Beyondblue – 1300 224 636*

*MensLine – 1300 789 978*

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**To coordinate an interview with Jess, please contact Kirsten Bruce or Holly Hamilton from VIVA! Communications on 02 9968 3741 / 0401 717 566 or 0434 799 839.**