

Kate, 48

Mother & teacher who studied genetics at university, has lived with bipolar disorder symptoms since her teens, MELBOURNE

Mother-to-one, budding artist and secondary school teacher who studied genetics at university, Kate, 48, Melbourne, has lived with symptoms of bipolar disorder since her early teens. She has sought psychological intervention and received treatment for depression for over 30 years and has been admitted to a mental health facility on four occasions.

It was not until 2012, then aged 42, after experiencing a chemically-induced hypomanic episode and seeking psychiatric evaluation, that Kate was formally diagnosed with bipolar disorder, after which she spent three weeks in a psychiatric hospital.

The bipolar diagnosis shed light on the extreme manic behaviours that Kate had exhibited during her schooling years and around the birth of her daughter.

Kate's condition only stabilised with the medication she was prescribed during her fourth hospital admission in 2016.

Living with bipolar disorder is isolating, exhausting and confusing for Kate. Even though she is currently stable, just talking and thinking about her mental health stirs Kate's emotions.

This is Kate's story.

"I describe bipolar disorder as overwhelming, isolating, exhausting, confusing and erratic. During my depression phases, I have isolated myself, pushed my friends away and been flooded with intense and constant, vicious thoughts," said Kate.

"Bipolar is associated with extremely low self-esteem and a lack of belief in yourself. I have brain-washed myself for so many years, to the extent that I can't accept a compliment and never believe anything positive about myself.

"I've gone from being fine one moment, to suicidal and irrational the next. My mood swings can be large or small, lasting hours, days or week," Kate said.

Self-medicated binge drinking, inappropriate behaviours, excessive weight gain and irrational sensitivities are just some of challenges with which Kate has had to contend over the years.

"Functioning alcoholic, sexually inappropriate, excessive risk taker, disorganised and overly sensitive are all labels that describe my past behaviours.

"I used to start new projects with overwhelming enthusiasm, and abandon them just as easily," said Kate.

"When I'm depressed, I am irritable and moody and people need to walk on egg shells around me. When I'm manic, I always think I am right and I have no perspective of just how unwell I am."

Bipolar disorder has significantly disrupted Kate's life. After experiencing a breakdown in 2002, and following the birth of her child in 2007, Kate's career was abruptly affected. She had to take a 10-year-long hiatus from her career due to her poor mental health. She subsequently forfeited career progression opportunities and found it difficult to return to the work force.



"I found it hard to return to work after taking 10 years off. I questioned my ability to teach again, and questioned how much I would remember from my earlier teaching days.

"Staying at home creates its own vicious cycle of loneliness, depression, fear, boredom and laziness, which further fuelled my mood swings and isolation. Unfortunately, my daughter and husband had to constantly bear the weight of this," Kate said.

Kate has used prescription medication to manage her bipolar disorder. However Kate's use of medication has resulted in many, associated side-effects, including a loss of libido, excessive weight gain and a predisposition to increased health risks.

"I am obese and I have diabetes. I lack self-confidence, hate the way I look, and suffer from incredible self-doubt. I have limited resilience, and even now when I am well and stable, just talking and thinking about my poor mental health makes me sad and tearful.

"The medications do help to stabilise my moods, but I have experienced anxiety and lack of self-esteem for many years as a consequence of bipolar disorder and medication-induced weight gain," said Kate.

"I make sure that I get up every morning, but sometimes that is as much as I can achieve. I have been on antidepressants for over 30 years, and I need the constant support of my husband and family.

"I also have to see my psychiatrist every five to eight weeks, and have done so since 2002," Kate said.

Kate 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 research, and Kate genuinely hopes her contribution will allow experts to unravel some important answers to help combat bipolar disorder.

"Having studied genetics at university, I firmly believe that genes influence your risk of bipolar disorder. I would like to think that a specific gene, or genes will be identified. I also believe that further exploration into the environmental influence on genes will give us much insight into potential triggers for the manifestation of bipolar symptoms.

"I am interested in this study because I studied genetics in my Bachelor degree, and bipolar disorder has significantly compromised my life," said Kate.

"Mental illness tends to be seen as 'all in the head' with the need to just 'buck up'. It would be a real step forward to be able to scientifically show there is a specific gene involved, or at least a definitive answer about one's genetic predisposition to mental illness. Then the public may be able to grasp the concept of an invisible illness better. This would go a long way toward reducing the stigma of a bipolar diagnosis. Education and awareness are key."

By sharing her story, Kate hopes to empower others experiencing symptoms of bipolar disorder, to seek the professional help they may require, and to urge those who have been treated for the illness, to volunteer for the *Australian Genetics of Bipolar Disorder Study*.

"I encourage others living with bipolar disorder symptoms to talk to their friends and family. It's ok to ask for help. See your GP as a first step. They will help you to navigate your way through the illness, via just talking therapy or medication.

"Open communication and transparency, coupled with increased scientific knowledge, will help to reduce the stigma of bipolar disorder," Kate said.

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 Kate, please contact Kirsten Bruce or Holly Hamilton from VIVA! Communications on 02 9968 3741 / 0401 717 566 or 0434 799 839.