

## Michelle, 50

### Marine biologist & environmental engineer who lived with bipolar disorder for six years prior to diagnosis, *ADELAIDE*

Marine biologist and environmental engineer, Michelle, 50, Adelaide, has lived with bipolar disorder for the past 33 years. During this period, she battled extreme highs and lows.

The disorder impacted all facets of Michelle's life, including her family, friends, career, and studies, as well as her physical health. She currently manages her illness with a combination of medication and intermittent visits to her psychologist.

As a biologist, Michelle strongly believes in the influence of genes in mental health. She is therefore participating in the *Australian Genetics of Bipolar Disorder Study* to help raise awareness of, and assist researchers to identify the genes responsible for bipolar disorder, to ultimately improve treatments for the illness.

This is Michelle's story.

"I was probably living with the symptoms of bipolar disorder for about six years before I was diagnosed. I wasn't consciously aware of it at the time, but looking back, I had the symptoms for a long time," said Michelle.

Experiencing numerous traumatic events as a teenager growing up in South Africa, Michelle isn't quite sure when her bipolar disorder was triggered.

"When I was 13 years of age, someone broke into our home, attacked my mum, and tried very hard to kill her. This had an incredible affect on my whole family.

"But I can really remember the symptoms of bipolar disorder from around the age of 17 or 18. I was a student in apartheid South Africa and was working in some very poor townships affected by extreme violence at the time. We lived in a world of turmoil and I was often followed by the security police and experienced some scary incidents when working there," Michelle said.

Her diagnosis came after a particularly difficult day during a depressive episode. While shopping with her family, Michelle broke down in the middle of the centre, crying. Her older sister, a medical doctor, diagnosed her with bipolar disorder and then referred her to her regular GP for confirmation. Michelle was 25 years of age at the time.

"Before I was able to properly manage my bipolar disorder, I experienced extreme highs and lows. During the highs, I would go for days without sleep, working frenetically on things. On many occasions I was stopped by strangers in the street who would ask me what drugs I was taking. During these times, if I wasn't working on a particular project or university-related work, I would also exercise excessively.

"At other times, I found the world bleak and inordinately sad. It felt as if the fuse had blown in my light box, and all the lights were out and couldn't be switched on. Sometimes I couldn't stop crying," said Michelle.

"The extreme lows [of bipolar disorder] are like living in a black hole. At times I would just lock myself away and not leave my house for days. There were certain days when I thought that even committing suicide would just be too much effort."

Prior to her diagnosis, Michelle enjoyed the high periods of her bipolar disorder. Feeling invincible and able to achieve anything, Michelle's energy also resulted in reckless behaviour. After a while, she began to fear the highs of her illness due to her impending crash into a depressive episode.

Michelle's battle with bipolar disorder extended into multiple facets of her life, disrupting her work, studies and relationships.

"During the lows, I have found it difficult to work and study. The mix of highs and lows has been confusing for some of my employers, for whom I am very productive for some periods, after which my productivity drops radically, to more normal levels. **more#**



“With my recent studies, this behaviour has been more manageable, because the universities are more understanding. But in the eighties and nineties when I first began studying, I just had to keep at it,” Michelle said.

“Living with bipolar disorder has also led to the loss of some friends, but ironically, I have gained friends because of the illness too – especially friends who also have mental health issues whom I can help and support.

“Still being single at the age of 50 is partly due to the disorder. The partners whom I have had have found it challenging to be with me. I have been accused of being a chameleon, and they don’t know how to handle the extremes of my emotions,” said Michelle.

Fortunately for Michelle, her family has stuck by her side “through thick and thin”, and continue to support her to this very day. Armed with this strong support network, together with regular visits to her psychologist and the use of medication, has enabled Michelle to effectively manage her bipolar disorder.

“My family treat my bipolar disorder the way they treat my nephew’s diabetes. It is just something that is in my chemistry. They have given me a safe haven on the few occasions when I have been completely non-functioning, and they prod me up when I’m down.

“At one stage, I was living alone and working for myself for a long time. During this time, my cousin called me every day to ensure I was okay. Strong family support has made living with bipolar disorder so much easier,” Michelle said.

“I have been on, and continue to take, medication. I went without medication for eight years, but struggled with the depression aspect of the disorder during that time. I have intermittently visited a psychologist, and continue to do so. I saw a psychiatrist regularly for around three years when I was going through a particularly bad patch. More recently, I have moved my focus toward regular exercise, which also helps.”

As a biologist, Michelle is convinced that genes influence one’s predisposition to bipolar disorder, and believes epigenetics may also be at play during which the genes are triggered by certain events.

Michelle 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 Michelle genuinely hopes her contribution will allow experts to unravel some important answers to help treat Bipolar disorder.

“I hope that by finding the genes that influence the development of bipolar disorder, we will be able to help people who experience this mental illness, and many others. It may become possible to test for the gene in families in whom bipolar disorder is prevalent, and help people before they develop symptoms. It might also ultimately become possible to tailor medication to the affected genes, so that people don’t have to go through the horrible “try this medication and see what happens” periods.

“Knowing there is a genetic component to bipolar disorder may also help to dispel the stigma still associated with having a mental illness. People often treat me as if I’m just a hypochondriac, malingering and looking for excuses. If it can be proven that this is just part of one’s coding, perhaps people will be more accepting of the illness,” said Michelle.

“I would just like to thank the organisers, researchers and funders of this study.

“I think all Australian adults who have been treated for bipolar disorder, should volunteer for this study. The larger the sample size, the more that can be learned about the genetics of people living with the illness,” Michelle said.

Michelle is hoping her story will encourage others living with bipolar disorder to not only participate in the study, but gain a sense of comfort from shared experience.

“When I was diagnosed with the disorder, I felt very alone and ashamed. If not for my amazing family, I would really have struggled to accept it.

“It’s important for people living with bipolar disorder to understand that they are just like so many others, and are neither alone, or crazy. Although everyone with bipolar disorder experiences the illness differently, I have found listening to other people’s stories helpful. By sharing my personal story, I hope to provide others living with the illness, with a little hope too.”

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