

## Neil Cole

### **Award-winning playwright, researcher & former Shadow Attorney-General who was diagnosed with bipolar disorder in the early 90s, MELBOURNE**

Award-winning playwright, researcher and former Shadow Attorney-General, Neil Cole, 61, Melbourne, was diagnosed with bipolar disorder in the early nineties. However, he suspects he may have been living with the illness for at least 20 years prior. Neil's bipolar disorder has had a profound impact on his life, hindering his university studies, contributing to the end of his political career, and ultimately, leading to a divorce from his wife.

Following his exit from politics, Neil set upon becoming a playwright, going on to win the prestigious Griffin Theatre Award in 1999, and becoming a mental health researcher and advocate. His debut novel, *Colonel Surry's Insanity*, published in 2010, drew heavily from his and others experience of bipolar disorder.

Neil is now an Associate Professor with the University of Melbourne's medical school, and has served as a member of the National Advisory Mental Health Council. He is participating in the *Australian Genetics of Bipolar Disorder Study* to help create further understanding of the illness, and is urging others living with bipolar disorder to follow suit.

#### **This is Neil's story.**

At the time of Neil's bipolar disorder diagnosis in 1993, he was experiencing a manic episode.

"At the time, my mind was racing, I had a rapid flow of thoughts, my behaviour was erratic, and I was obsessive. That was when I was finally diagnosed with bipolar disorder by a psychiatrist.

"My illness really hindered my studies at university, and I was unhappy a lot. One week I would study religiously, and the next I would stay in bed all day," said Neil.

His psychiatrist gave him a book titled *'Ecstasy and Agony: Living with Mood Swings'*. Neil identified with all the signs, and was therefore diagnosed with bipolar disorder, although he had known since going through puberty that something was amiss.

The psychiatrist was not Neil's first. In fact, he had visited three psychiatrists prior to his diagnosis, although none had identified he was living with bipolar disorder until he was 35 years of age.

The diagnosis came at the height of Neil's political career, and in 1995, was leaked to the public by his political enemies, forcing his acknowledgment of the disorder, and his resignation as Shadow Attorney-General.

The impact on his political career was merely one area of his life affected by the illness.

"It was an unpleasant state to be in. I had obsessions and a feeling of grandiosity. I had times where I was spending money, and I was overly empathetic, leading me to giving people money.

"During my depressive episodes, I would be in an extreme state of melancholia, unable to function properly. I would lack self-esteem and feel full of guilt," Neil said.

"My bipolar disorder led to my divorce. I couldn't properly form relationships."

Although he was successfully re-elected to his seat in 1996, Neil departed politics in 1999, after losing pre-selection for the seat of Melbourne. His exit from politics spurred his journey with playwrighting, mental health research and advocacy.

He has since written over 30 plays, and published a novel which drew heavily upon his, and other peoples' experiences of living with bipolar disorder. Neil then assumed a role as Associate Professor at Monash University, where he contributes to mental health research. His advocacy in the area now extends into counselling and not-for-profit work.

Nowadays, Neil successfully manages his bipolar disorder with a mixture of medication and self-awareness.

Neil 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 study, and Neil genuinely hopes his contribution will allow experts to unravel some important answers to help treat bipolar disorder.

"I do think your genes can put you at risk of developing bipolar disorder. Two of my brothers lived with severe melancholia.

"I'm participating in this study to help understand the illness. Every adult living with bipolar disorder should consider assisting too, because doing so could help to both treat and manage the illness in the future," said Neil.

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