

## Tameka, 49

### Stay at home mother, carer & photography enthusiast who has experienced symptoms of bipolar disorder for most of her life, *PERTH*

Stay at home mother, carer and photography enthusiast, Tameka, 49, Perth, has experienced symptoms of bipolar disorder for most of her life.

Tameka was formally diagnosed with bipolar disorder at 22 years of age, and has been successfully managing her symptoms ever since with medication and counselling.

She now realises the effects that living with untreated bipolar disorder had on her life and encourages anyone who may be experiencing similar symptoms, to seek help and not be afraid to speak out.

Tameka is participating in the *Australian Genetics of Bipolar Disorder Study* to help raise awareness of bipolar disorder and assist researchers to identify the genes that cause the illness. She also hopes to encourage conversation around mental health.

**This is Tameka's story.**

"For most of my life, even in early childhood, I felt as though something wasn't right.

"I would go through extreme emotions – anger, sadness and happiness – and I could burst into tears for no reason at all. It got to the point where I was very unhappy with life in general and didn't see the point in being around," said Tameka.

Tameka acknowledges her father having a serious accident when she was young, may have been a trigger for her illness.

"I distinctly remember my whole world changing after my father had an awful car accident when I was eight-years-old.

"I was also in a bad car accident when I was 22, which caused my life to spiral out of control for six months. I had to leave my job, I isolated myself from my friends and lost a lot of weight. It was then that I sought professional help," Tameka said.

Tameka initially visited her GP, who referred her to a psychologist and psychiatrist, after which she was formally diagnosed with bipolar disorder.

"Diagnosis was actually quite difficult, as I had learned to put on a façade during my life, and had hidden my symptoms.

"Once diagnosed, it was trial and error with medications, and I was still experiencing manic and depressive episodes. I finally found a medication that worked for me, and it made all the difference," said Tameka.

"I was also attending regular psychologist appointments to learn how to manage my illness."

Although bipolar disorder has greatly affected Tameka's personal and professional life, she credits her husband's care and support for keeping her on track.

"It has been really hard on my family, especially on my husband. When I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder, we had only been together for 12 months and were not yet married. I am lucky that he was such a great support, otherwise, I don't think I'd still be here.

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"I also lost a lot of friends [due to my illness], especially because I was isolating myself from everyone. I developed pretty severe social anxiety and refused to leave the house.

"My work also suffered, as I couldn't hold a job in my most depressive cycle. All I did was stay home and cry," Tameka said.

Tameka has a 15-year-old daughter with high functioning autism, for whom she cares while managing her own symptoms.

"I have a very strict routine for my daughter because she's at school part-time. It can definitely be difficult at times to manage my own symptoms as well.

"If I start to feel as though I'm falling behind with my own self-care, I book an appointment straight away with my psychologist to work out an action plan," said Tameka.

Tameka suspects there may be a correlation between genetics and bipolar disorder.

"There is a history of mental illness in my family, so I believe genes could definitely play a role in bipolar disorder.

"If there is a strong genetic link, it's especially important to uncover it, because it could greatly assist with future diagnosis and treatment," Tameka said.

Tameka 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 Tameka genuinely hopes her contribution will not only assist in the discovery of some important answers, but will also help to shake some of the stigma surrounding mental illness.

"It's so important for people to feel as though they can talk about what they're experiencing. It's also important that people can recognise the warning signs of mental illness, in those whom they love.

"Mental illness is just like any other disease or condition. The more research that takes place, the easier it will be to detect and treat," said Tameka.

"If you are experiencing any symptoms of bipolar disorder, you're not alone, help is out there. Speak to your family and friends about how you're feeling, and seek professional medical help."

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