

Foreword

This book is dedicated to my wonderful family. My fabulous parents, Jenny and Phil, and my wonderful siblings, Daniel, Naomi and Ruth, have done their best to support me throughout my life, often struggling to come to terms with my mental illness, but never giving up on me. This memoir also honors the memory of a lost friend, Nicola Conroy, whom this book is unfortunately too late to save. In addition, I would like to dedicate this work to every sufferer of Bipolar Disorder, and to their families and friends who battle bravely alongside. Finally, this book is also dedicated to the destigmatization of all forms of depression and mental illness, suffered in silence by too many for too long, in order to promote healing and encourage more love, understanding and compassion all around the world.

“Sanity and happiness are an impossible combination.”

– Mark Twain

I HAD THE INCREDIBLE privilege of meeting Roni Askey-Doran when I was in my first year of university studying a Bachelor of Community Development. Roni had just turned 15 and I was all of 20 years old and I remember feeling incredibly wise in my chosen career as a Youth Worker. Roni has ever-after helped me stay grounded in the knowledge that it is not therapeutic models of intervention and theories of trauma that make the difference in a child’s life – it is about relationships and integrity.

I was working night shifts in a youth refuge in Townsville, a small city in North Queensland, Australia and Roni was in my ‘charge’. I write this with a smile, as early on I discovered that I was certainly not in charge. I was, however, determined to hang on to whatever part of her I could cling to as she took me on an incredible journey of her highest of highs and lowest of lows.

One frightening evening, I can remember with absolute clarity. Roni had gone out with a group of young men and had not returned by curfew. I was worried sick and finally pried information from one of the other young residents that the men had guns in their possession and were planning to hurt her. I called the police and, thank goodness, they found her and brought her back to me. I recall the Police handing Roni over to my custody and looking at me strangely when all I could do was burst into tears and hug her until she hugged me back.

Roni is a survivor and I learned very quickly that her exuberance masked a great deal of pain and self-doubt. I did not have the skills to be anything other than her friend and to show her by sheer determination that I cared very much about her regardless of her behavior. I remember many sleepless nights trying to work out how to help this troubled child temper her adventurous spirit to be just a little safer. She was wild, wonderful, outrageous and provided the most fun and fear a youth worker could ever hope to experience. Our friendship has maintained a steady course over the years, not dulled by distance as Roni skips around the globe.

As an adult, Roni continues to defy the odds by not only surviving but thriving in her many reincarnations which include: fashion designer, gourmet chef, journalist, magazine editor, English teacher, tour guide, café owner, travel planner, prolific blogger, fearless adventuress and author of cooking books, fiction, non-fiction and now, a real life account of her healing and recovery. Thirty-two years after our first encounter, she never ceases to amaze me!

I hope she will always feel my hugs.

Friend and admirer

Lesley Taylor

Lesley Taylor

Northern Territory Manager

National Association for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect

www.napcan.org.au

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Who is Roni?



Hi! I'm Roni!

JUST SO THERE IS no confusion, let me start by telling you a little something about myself. Firstly, I'm not a psychologist. I'm not a psychiatrist. I am not professionally qualified in any way whatsoever as a therapist. So, who the hell am I to talk to you about Bipolar Disorder and its treatment? I'm a bipolaroid and suffer from its alternate crazy manias and bleak depressions, just like you. If that weren't challenging enough, I also suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and I'm a bit obsessive-compulsive (OCD) too. In fact, I'm completely nuts, and just as likely (in a visualized version of events) to throw you off a bridge as buy you a drink, possibly both in the same day. Don't worry, it's not painful – not for you anyway. I would never actually throw you off a bridge. I might be nuts, but I'm not psycho!

I've been coping with my bipolarity for many years, scaling the highest peaks and plunging into the deepest valleys of my unstable emotional life, oftentimes isolated and alone. Like you, I've lived like the uphill were

mountains and the downhills were cliffs. I've clung by my fingernails to that all too familiar precipice, wondering if there was a single reason to keep on living when life was so void of light that it seemed as if tomorrow did not exist. I've experienced those dizzy feelings of grandiosity and all the manic joy and creative insanity that bounce along with them and seen the unlimited possibilities to an endlessly bright future. I know how that maniacal creativity at the peak should be treasured, and harnessed as a source of natural energy, as it contains all the vitality of life itself. I've heard all those voices alternately cheering me on and shouting me down. I, too, have peered into the blackness and seen no reason to live.

I've ridden the classic diagnosis train of this chronic mental illness, stopped at all its obligatory "meds" stations, and made sure I kept my terrible secret under lock and key in the caboose for years and endless excruciating years, just as instructed by professionals who know better. Then, after feeling like my head was inside a cloud of steam for way too long, unable to express myself creatively, incapable of maintaining a healthy relationship, I got off at the next possible stop. If this was treatment, I'd rather be sick. If this was my life, I'd rather be dead. As it was, I already felt like a walking corpse standing on the roof of a runaway locomotive careening over a crumbling bridge.

Still, that feeling of being so completely overwhelmed by darkness frequently paralyzed me. I was an emotional train wreck for many years. All of my relationships suffered terribly. Three failed marriages and a couple of seriously trashed romances later, feeling markedly like a B-Grade Elizabeth Taylor, and flunking out on motherhood, sisterhood, daughterhood, niecehood and aunthood, not to mention humanhood, I constantly wondered what was wrong with me. I'm a freak! Too ashamed to tell anyone how I really felt, and so often embarrassed by outbursts of rampant uncontrollable anger, impotent rage and otherwise inexplicable mood swings, the label "mental illness" clawed away at my self-esteem and terrorized my innate need for social connection. Afraid of being the subject of a soul-destroying smear-campaign, and running as fast as humanly possible away from being stigmatized, I suffered in silence. Swinging wildly from one extreme to the other, often flailing in the void, I felt alienated from family and friends.

Determined to rid my life of anti-depressants and live drug-free, I spent years seeking help from people who supposedly understood what I needed. It wasn't easy. Hopping from office to office, wherever I was

in the world, I met all kinds of therapists, some of them obviously unhinged. The hippy-freak in a multi-colored scarf-skirt and rainbow-wrapped hair in Sydney who told me to imagine purple spots and laugh at them takes the Nutso-Psycho-Therapist Award for being completely ridiculous. Then, there was the psychiatrist in Istanbul who hit on me, insisting he could vastly improve my self-esteem in bed. And the woman in London who tried to hypnotize me into eternal happiness by playing whale music and waving her grandfather's antique pocket watch in front of my astonished face. And let's not forget the Berliner who was so intent on trying his electro-convulsive therapy (ECT) experiments on me that I became seriously concerned about his mental health. Then, every second therapist I saw was writing out a prescription before I could even sit down and explain the problem, until one day I just stood up before they'd written two words and said, "I'll save you the time, and me the money if I just leave right now."

In the end, I figured the therapists were crazier than me. And, as far as I could tell, none of them suffered from depression. They were a little delusional, and maybe slightly loopy, but certainly not bipolar. It was like asking a guy to understand menstrual trauma. Or a woman to empathize with penile dysfunction. However many books they've read about it, they still don't know how it feels. Cynical, you think? Yes, maybe just a tad.

At times, the people I loved the most rejected me, often inadvertently, also feeling helpless and overwhelmed at my inability to cope with the simplest daily tasks and my unpredictable explosions, and clueless about how to offer support. They didn't understand that a simple hug could be more than enough. They sometimes pushed me away so I wouldn't bring them down. For a free-spirited double Gemini with a Pisces rising, feeling isolated, bleak and uninspired was totally uncharacteristic.

"Of course, they hate me," I told myself. "I'm unlovable and repulsive. I hate me, too."

***"I will love myself despite the ease
with which I lean toward the opposite."***

– Shane Koyczan, poet and writer

To be honest, there were umpteen times I thought I'd rather kill myself than continue along this path. How many nights did I lay in bed, craving solace and obsessively concocting all manner of painless suicides? How

could it look like an accident? Who'd care anyway? How many people, who had no idea of my living nightmare, had told me to "Get over it!?" Was it all in my mind, like they said? Those frightening questions and more crowded my head, melding with my endless doubts and insecurities, blocking out any hope for the future. Tomorrow vanished forever in a black screen of dismal nothingness.

Fortunately, I'm still here, and these days my life's path is mostly lined with bright flowers. Yes, the odd nasty weed pops up along the way, and occasionally I get depressed. Luckily, I have some amazing tools to get through one day at a time – sometimes it's one hour at a time, or one minute at a time – and ride the waves of depression with much less despair, and a lot more hope. Today, even from the bottom, there is usually a glimpse of light in my future. After almost forty years of living with bipolar depression and PTSD, mostly without any pharmaceutical assistance, I'd like to share with you some of the unique strategies I've learned and the wonderful toolkit I use to cope. But let's first have a quick look at my mental health history.

As if being sexually abused for twelve years from the age of four wasn't soul-crushing enough, at the age of 16, I was gang-raped by four men from a local motorcycle club while walking along the beach at night on my way to a friend's house. A few days later, I tried to commit suicide. So ashamed of this incident, I never told a soul. Instead, I took a lot of pills. I don't remember what they were, but it was almost a whole bottle. My distraught father found me unconscious and rushed me to hospital to have my stomach pumped, saving my life and, although I wondered why for a very long time, I'm now extremely grateful that he did.

The only therapy on offer back then was compulsory group sessions with a number of severely mentally disturbed adults who'd been involuntarily committed to the psychiatric ward, and the hospital psychiatrist. Those sessions alone scared me enough to not want to ever go back. There was a man who stood on his toes and crowed like a rooster, then rolled on the floor and giggled crazily. A woman who mumbled incoherently to herself and picked at her sleeves non-stop. And another who sat open-mouthed and dribbled, wagging her feet. And the guy who leaped around and shouted every time someone looked at him. With everyone leaping and dancing and jiggling and giggling and hiding under the chairs at every therapy session it was all I could do not to run away terrified. Those people were certifiably insane! I wasn't crazy, I was deeply depressed and, after

enduring the sexual abuse and the gang-rape in silence, I was screaming for help. Every five seconds, I was jumping out of my skin. I was admitted to Psych-Ward-10B with rape-trauma and bipolar depression and left with enhanced PTSD symptoms.

***“PTSD is best described as:
I jumped out of my skin and kept on jumping.”***

Many of the nurses treated me with contempt. One of the hospital staff told me I was “nothing but a selfish attention-seeker” as he slammed a tray of inedible gray mush on the table near my bed. I high-tailed it out of there as soon as I could; a friend who had come to visit helped me escape. I gave him my tiny bundle of belongings, ostensibly “to be washed”. We casually sauntered outside “to say goodbye”. He went to start the car and, still in my derrière-revealing hospital gown, I casually hovered near the bushes that served as a fence. Then, while no one was looking, I slipped through the hedge just as he opened the passenger-side door and we vanished. It would be at least two hours until I was missed. I got dressed in the car. He drove me home to my surprised parents. Meanwhile, my volatile, and potentially life-threatening condition went undiagnosed and untreated.

For many years after that, I had a death-wish and pulled numerous crazy and dangerous stunts all over the world in the hope that something might kill me by accident if I couldn't do it myself. I took all manner of prescribed and illicit drugs, drank myself stupid with every kind of alcohol, rode motorbikes way too fast, hung out with some seriously dicey characters, jumped off mountains with faulty parachutes, drove cars recklessly, stuck my head out of train windows, rode on bus roofs, picked fights with lunatics, hitchhiked everywhere, shouted defiantly at muggers, played with guns, smuggled illicit drugs, walked in the streets alone late at night, hung out in dark alleys, committed countless crimes against my body, dated a never-ending stream of “bad boys” many of whom eventually ended up in prison, pretended I hadn't been date-raped, married abusive men, and the list goes on Again, filled with bitter resentment, I survived with nary a bruise. My cheerful postcards home reflected none of the emotional chaos.

In Thailand, in my early twenties – when I was ten-feet-tall-and-bullet-proof – I rode a motorbike all over the country, often speeding along

highways and winding mountain roads alike, ignoring the smattering of unintelligible road safety signs, including the “!” one, and usually not wearing a helmet. One afternoon, I was roaring along the road from Mae Hong Son, near the Burmese border, to Pai, a sleepy artisans village located in the mountain ranges, when I came flying around a corner, lying almost horizontal on the bike, to see a local man leading four elephants. They'd blocked the whole route. A steep cliff plummeted down one side of the road. I was going too fast to stop safely.

Straightening up, I held my breath and thought, “This will kill me.”

My whole body tensed into a hard ball of pending death. Then, letting go of all the levers, I jammed my eyes closed, and waited for the inevitable impact that would surely end my life. I felt strangely calm. A long moment passed. I opened my eyes. I'd passed through the elephants unscathed. Somehow, and don't ask me how, I survived. I braked right in the middle of the road on the curve and stared, gobsmacked, at the four lumbering animals still completely blocking the road. The man sitting cross-legged on the neck of the first elephant barely offered me a second glance. Almost suffocated from the lack of oxygen, I began breathing again. Then, I burst into tears. Trembling and crying, the rest of my road trip to Pai was more sedate.

This mortality-check slowed me down for about twenty-four hours. After that, the addictive adrenaline rush of unlimited speeds and wind whipping my hair helped me to forget those feelings of fear and, denying my death-wish, to flippantly relate the incident like just one more thrilling white-knuckle travel story. My listeners, mostly backpackers my own age, instead of questioning my sanity, applauded my heroic efforts as an extreme adventuress, laughed at my wild travel tales, and encouraged me to tell more, as if this was perfectly normal behavior.

If that bothersome idiom: “What doesn't kill you makes you stronger!” is an absolute truth, I now have some wicked superpowers and am probably strong enough to throw the next person who says that to me over the nearest building – sans visualization!

In the early 90s, I was diagnosed as “manic-depressive” and given a prescription for a popular anti-depressant pill. The psychologist who did the examination dismissed my concerns about taking prescribed medications. I wasn't offered another solution. After years of trying to cope with the after-shocks of sexual abuse, physical abuse, verbal abuse,

abusive relationships, bullying, rape, PTSD, self-harm, trauma and a range of other abuses and massive emotional obstacles, I was not only depressed – I was suicidal, again. And everyone around me thought I was crazy. I was mere inches from being involuntarily committed to another psychiatric ward.

*“There are many ways of getting strong,
sometimes talking is the best way.”*

– Andre Agassi, Open

Reluctantly, with my back against the wall, I began taking the prescribed medication. A few weeks later, I started to feel slightly better, if very foggy, but that one nagging question remained:

“Can my depression be treated without drugs?”

I believed it could. I just didn't know how. After a short time, I stopped taking the anti-depressants, which made me feel like a brainless zombie, and slid once again into a years-long battle with depression and wild mood-swings. I ran away from my family to avoid the psych-ward and went to the nearest international airport. Continent-skipping became the new treatment. “Going Geographical” was an endless roller-coaster ride, the highest of highs, the lowest of lows. I really tried hard to stretch out the highs. They were typically manic and unpredictable. Like most bipolaroids, I was at my most productive and creative during the highs. Once, buoyed by a massive manic rollercoaster peak, I wrote a full-length semi-autobiographical novel in twenty-eight days, neither eating nor sleeping for most of that time. It became clear to the people around me that I was manic, but they didn't know how to help. However, the lifelong self-sabotage campaign swaggering alongside my ambition as an author has been the most successful element of my entire writing career so far.

As the editor of a popular monthly magazine, the highs were super-productive; multi-tasking was a breeze, ideas bubbled from my over-active mind like a washing machine with too much detergent, and I barely slept for eagerness to take advantage of the heady buzz I got at the peak. Working as a journalist, I could stay high for months, working as if possessed by demons, creative to a ridiculous and sometimes frightening extreme and, all the while, the tragic mentalness of my condition remained largely undetected by anyone in my social circles.

At times, a quirky comment passed from one friend to another, like:
“She’s a bit mad!”

This would flit through my consciousness, brush past reality, then be crushed by denial, and I’d casually respond:

“Aren’t we all?”

On the down-slide, that same self-driven manic-powered magazine editor struggled to put words and pictures together to match the headlines during the lows. That ambitious journalist couldn’t put two coherent thoughts together. I dragged myself through what felt like the emotional version of wet, sticky road tar, barely surviving one day at a time. Once the layout and design were done and the delicate negatives (before PDFs were invented!) had been sent to the printing house, I could finally collapse into a wrecked heap of broken pieces. Minutes before the deadlines, my news stories were finally submitted and I could crawl into an agonized heap until the next deadline loomed. It wasn’t easy but, even during the worst of it, I refused to take anti-depressants to help me through.

Some days I felt like I was drowning. Other days I wallowed neck-deep in my woes and couldn’t move. Dishes stayed unwashed. Clothes unlaundered. Food went unbought, uncooked, or uneaten. Days passed as I slept, and slept and slept. And the door to my house remained unopened for days or even weeks at a time. Often, I felt trapped or as if I was walking blindly through quicksand.

Other times, I was filled with so much crazy optimism and positive energy, my thirst for life was unquenchable. It was almost impossible to sleep. My brain never stopped turning over. A maze of incredible ideas burst forth. Living the supposedly glamorous life of an editor, I went to a never-ending round of concerts and after-parties, film previews, theater galas and art gallery openings. Surviving on the aroma of sleep, I interviewed musicians, actors and artists. My journalist-manifestation was an out-of-hours party-animal. As a bipolaroid backpacker, I traveled extensively. When I tired of Europe, I went to Asia to exhaust myself, then hit the Middle East – I’m not sure who was more shocked, me or them! Nursing old emotional wounds, I stayed well away from my own country, pretty much ensuring my failure as a local author.

After a while, following each extended high, came the inevitable crash. I plummeted to the bottom of the barrel again. It was like being stuck inside a narrow tube slowly filling with water. My bipolarity ruled my

life. At the deepest, darkest bottom of my depression, with thoughts of ending it all then and there, I reluctantly went to see yet another therapist. This would be Number Thirty-Four. My faith in therapists had all but vanished. I wasn’t interested in prescriptions; I needed real help.

In 2003, I was diagnosed once again as bipolar, and informed that I was suffering from PTSD. This wasn’t news. The world was filled with innumerable triggers that made life impossible. I felt like a guitar string wound way too tight. Every person who twanged me was shocked by my coming unstrung. Friends fell away like dead skin cells. Family couldn’t cope. I was “the crazy one” they didn’t talk about – not with compassion anyway. Even though depression bares the nickname, *the common cold of mental health*, the stigma of mental illness shamed me into deeper depressions and starker isolation. All around, I was getting a bad rap. As a traveler, I could reinvent myself everywhere I went, as long as I was on a high. The lows sent me scuttling to the nearest airport. Moving on helped, but my Going Geographical therapy was only temporarily successful. Countless times I have been told that both of these conditions are incurable. I still don’t know if that’s true. Nevertheless, I needed to find a way to live with them – drug free.

***“Just because I have a mental illness,
doesn’t mean you can’t bring me
nuts and fruit cakes for Christmas.”***

The next dispassionate psychiatrist immediately prescribed lithium, and nonchalantly stated that I would be taking it for the rest of my life. Barely glancing in my direction, he indicated that was the only way I was ever going to feel better. I stood up and smiled. I shook his hand and thanked him, and walked out of his office. I left the prescription on his desk. Then, I went home, climbed into bed, and cried my broken heart out. Disconsolate, but determined, I refused to spend the rest of my life dependent on prescription drugs. I also vowed to never consult another therapist.

As a world traveler, I frequently visit remote countries, places off the beaten track. Often, I live for long periods in out-of-the-way locations. If I’m hooked on prescribed drugs, what happens when I run out? There are no pharmacies on remote hilltops in the middle of the Amazonian jungle, or in those isolated little villages on the banks of the Mekong Delta.

The Inca Trail is not lined with drug stores. The Great Wall of China does not feature auto-medication-machines. Well, not yet, anyway. The place I chose to build my dream home is a remote coastal village barely marked on the map, where the pharmacy stocks beer and cigarettes but not aspirin.

It wasn't just about putting artificial drugs, heavy metals, and toxic chemicals into my body, it was also a question of accessibility. Refusing to limit my peripatetic lifestyle, it was important that I could carry my treatment with me. It had to be available everywhere I went. In the end, I learned that it was.

Just to be clear, I'm not saying don't take prescribed medications to treat your depression. Many people do need anti-depressant medication to cope. What I wanted for myself was to live without medication, so that my nomadic lifestyle wouldn't be affected by an "incurable" condition. It's not a method that works for everyone, but it works well for me most of the time.

Purely by accident, I met a couple of amazing therapists, one of whom I will call "MM" – the last psychologist I ever consulted – and who taught me that my treatment was inside me: In my heart. In my soul. In my mind. In my body. And who showed me that no trip was ever going to be more significant than the journey to my peace of mind. MM, along with a fabulous psychoanalyst, known in these pages as "MP", as well as the writings and musings of Maya Angelou, Deepak Chopra, Rumi, Carl Sagan, Khalil Gibran, Socrates, and many other infinitely wise and knowledgeable people far too numerous to name have taught me how to live, along with regular intensive Internet research and some well-established support networks. And I'm still here today, managing my "incurable bipolarness" and my PTSD and OCD on a daily basis, without any kind of chemical anti-depressant. As I gradually learned how to live bipolarly drug-free, the rollercoaster leveled out somewhat, but my hunger for travel has never been fully sated.

This book was written on a remote beach in South America. It was initially inspired by a friend who asked me to help by sharing my strategies for coping with mental illness. As our discussions progressed, I began to realize just how much I have learned and how well-equipped my emotional tool kit has become over time. In the middle of helping one friend, another asked for advice, and then someone else was curious how I manage my bipolarity with a positive outlook and a smile for everyone.

These lengthy discussions eventually morphed into this book. I'm grateful to all of them for the inspiration.

How do I do it? Please allow me to share that with you. I don't know if reading about my experiences will help you cope with your depression. I know that all of the following information turned my life around. It may or may not change yours. My bipolarity and I can't promise you anything except a lot of agonizing hard work and the odd laugh between fits of rage and tears. It took a long time and a great deal of pain to make this work. It took mountains of dedication and a skyful of patience. I can tell you what worked for me, and what didn't, and encourage you to try it yourself, and to persevere, to see if it works. If my custom-built toolkit makes a small difference to one person's life, it's worth sharing. Thank you for taking the time to read about some of my experiences with managing both bipolar depression and PTSD.

Although there seems to be no apparent cure, and even though each individual will react differently to the same stimuli, I hope that something within these pages touches a chord and makes a difference. Maybe some good will eventually come out of mine and your suffering and we can all find a way to smile at least once a day, because I'm worth it, and you're worth it too. Trust me. You are!

*"Not to spoil the ending for you,
but everything is going to be okay!"*

