



# VOICES

PERSONAL STORIES FROM THE PAGES OF NIB

## **Living with Mental Health Challenges: Personal Stories of Recovery from Across the Globe**

### A Peer-to-Peer Conversation Guide for People Living with Mental Health Challenges\*

By Annie Friedrich, PhD

You can download the stories we reference in this study guide for free. Please see the "Living with Mental Health Challenges" volume of VOICES here: <https://nibjournal.org/voices/>.

The sociologist Art Frank wrote a short article on learning from narratives for NIB. Please visit <https://nibjournal.org/education/narratives/> or see the Narratives Page under the Education tab on the NIB website to download Art Frank's article.

#### **General Questions:**

1. Many of the authors talk about how it can be difficult to address stigma and bias about mental health challenges. What stereotypes do the authors discuss in the stories? As someone living with mental health challenges, how do negative stereotypes get in the way of your recovery or treatment?
2. What are some of the different meanings of recovery that the authors discuss in the stories? What does "recovery" mean to you? In your opinion, is "recovery" possible?
3. The Western biomedical model of psychiatry focuses on using medications or drugs that affect the mind, emotions, and behaviors to treat mental health challenges, but social or financial stressors can also cause mental health challenges. What are some of the strengths and weaknesses of using only medications to treat mental health challenges? What strategies could address the social or financial problems that can also affect mental health? What are the barriers to using these strategies?

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4. Several authors use treatments or strategies other than medication to manage their mental health challenges. What strategies have you tried that have been most helpful in your path to recovery?

## **Story Questions:**

### ***My Wedding Day***

Syrena Oswald, Canada

1. Syrena remembers a severe manic episode that led to her hospitalization and diagnosis of Bipolar I. Was there a distinct episode that led to your diagnosis? What is your recollection of that episode? How did other people respond? What was helpful? What was unhelpful?
2. Syrena shares her story in order to bring light to mental healthcare practices that might need to change. In your opinion, what are some common practices in mental healthcare that need to change? What would need to be done for those practices to change? What could get in the way of it changing?

### ***From Fear to Love***

Glenn Roil, Canada

1. Although Glenn had other family members with mental illness, this was "swept under the rug and not spoken about." Glenn was made to feel like the "black sheep in the family and the only person who struggled." Was mental health discussed openly in your family? Why or why not?
2. Glenn writes, "What has been challenging for me was dealing with my family, who did not understand or accept me or other people facing mental health challenges. My immediate family did not support me when I needed them the most." In what ways has your family been supportive or understanding of your mental health challenges? In what ways has their support been lacking? How might they improve their acceptance and understanding?

### ***A Voice of Hope for Mental Health in Cambodia***

Bunna Phoeun & Fr Kevin Conroy, Cambodia

1. Although Bunna had experienced "many problems" related to her behavior, she did not know that her behavior was a sign of mental illness. When did you begin to notice troubling signs, and what prompted you to seek help?
2. Bunna was hesitant to share her mental health struggles with co-workers because she worried that they would think she was a "psychopath." When should people tell others about their mental health challenges? Is it ever best not to share? How did you tell friends, family members, or co-workers about your mental health challenges? Why might it be hard for you to talk about your struggles with loved ones?

### ***It Is Never Too Late to Turn the Page and Rewrite the Story of Your Life***

Konstantinos Manthos (Translation by Eleni Chatzopoulou), Greece

1. Konstantinos writes, "I consider friendship as one of the most important values in my life.... Friendship can make the painful experiences more tolerable, can reduce the fear that I may feel. Friends give me the courage to continue living in a more entertaining way...." Talk about the friends or family members who support you. What makes their support so important?
2. For Konstantinos, discussing his mental health challenges is a powerful way to fight bias and stigma. As someone living with mental health challenges, how do you fight bias and stigma?

### ***Depression: One Person's Perspective***

Craig Marchant, Australia

1. Craig experienced his first hallucinations at age 17 but was not diagnosed correctly until four years later. Talk about the time between when your symptoms started and when you were diagnosed and perhaps started treatment. What was that period like for you?
2. In the early years of his mental health challenges, Craig writes, "I remember mum at one stage asking the doctor if it could be depression, but he replied that children my age didn't get depression. Ha! If only." In what ways does misinformation or lack of information continue to harm the mental health field? Did misinformation or lack of information keep you from receiving treatment? If so, how?

### ***Learning How to Take Care of the Otherness of Myself***

Anonymous One, Columbia

1. What do you think Anonymous One means by "learning how to take care of the otherness of myself"?
2. Anonymous One says, "Knowing that I had bipolar disorder and borderline personality disorder (BPD) was the first step towards my recovery. Finally, someone put a name on my condition so it became true for other people, like my family." In what ways was receiving a formal diagnosis helpful for you? Did the condition become "true" for you, your family members, or friends after the diagnosis? In what way?

### ***My Journey from Psychological Rape to Spiritual Awakening***

Fehmida Visnegarwala, India

1. Fehmida discusses the importance of spirituality and certain spiritual practices in her journey toward recovery. What roles, if any, do faith and spirituality play in your journey?
2. Fehmida writes, "The states of ecstasy and bliss during my manic states are only momentary, yet they are transformative. They fill me with a conviction that one is much

bigger than just a body and mind." Have you ever had similar transformative experiences during certain episodes or states? How do you balance the potential benefits of these episodes with the practical difficulties or dangers of these states or episodes?

### ***On the Road to Get Our Son Cured from Schizophrenia***

Luc De Bry (father), Catherine De Bry-Meeùs (mother) & Valère De Bry (son), Belgium

1. The De Bry family did their own research to learn more about their son's condition. They found a treatment that worked. What kind of research have you conducted to learn more about your mental health challenges? In what areas is more research needed? If you found a treatment outside of medication, did your doctor support you?
2. Unlike Valère, many people living with mental health challenges do not have access to medical treatment, alternative healing therapies, or families who support them. What barriers to resources exist in your own communities? How have these barriers hindered your care, and how (if at all) have you been able to overcome these barriers?

### ***The Lost Darn Tea-Time of the Soul***

Nataliya Yaneva, Bulgaria

1. Nataliya writes, "Having depression is a peculiar experience. I wouldn't go so far as to say I'm grateful for it but I certainly learned a great deal from living with it.... I've learned to be more tolerant, more patient, more compassionate, and thoughtful. I wouldn't be the person I am today without my anxiety and my depression." What lessons have you learned from living with mental health challenges?
2. Nataliya ends her story with a quote by Andrew Solomon, who says: 'Every day, I choose, sometimes gamely and sometimes against the moment's reason, to be alive. Is that not a rare joy?' What small and rare joys give you strength to continue pursuing recovery? When you may not be improving, what motivates you to continue on?

### ***Living to Die: On Chronic Suicidality and the Authentic Self***

Michael Nair-Collins, United States of America

1. Michael says, "' You are not your illness' is a common refrain in mental health circles, and I don't buy it. I don't deny that my brain and emotional, cognitive, and behavioral functioning appears different from many others, nor that these differences have caused me severe difficulties in life. But the only conclusion I take from this is that I am neuroatypical: my brain/mind is not "typical" (whatever that means). But the fact of my neuroatypicality does not imply that I must accept the disorder model for explaining my authentic self, a model that denies the richness of my experience, including all the pain and all the joy, as genuinely *mine*, as authentic aspects of *myself*. The disorder model shrugs off these experiences as pathological, to be gotten rid of or 'managed.' This framework sees much of my life's experience as nothing but 'dysfunctional biochemical activities' and not my authentic self. I reject this idea thoroughly and completely." Do

you agree or disagree that mental health challenges are part of one's "authentic" self? Why? What do you see as strengths and weaknesses of the disorder model (that is, the thinking that mental health challenges are a disorder that need to be fixed, rather than the thinking that mental health challenges are a part of who you are)?

2. Michael reflects on the effect his suicide would have on family and friends and says, "I will leave my family and friends to go on living without me, carrying the grief and loss, the pain, the lack of understanding, perhaps guilt.... This aspect of suicide has, in the past, given me enough space to take the first, critical step back from that terrible brink. But I also know that is not enough in the long term—one cannot live solely out of obligation to others." Have you had conversations with friends or family members about the impact your suicide might have on them? What was difficult, powerful, or meaningful about those conversations? Do you feel as though you are living "solely out of obligation to others?" In what ways?

### ***Motherhood, Work, and Mental Health: One Woman's Journey***

Karin T. O'Brien, United States of America

1. Karin discusses the challenges of managing her mental health while having a career and also being a mother. How do the pressures of work and family life affect your mental health? How do you balance competing demands in your own life?
2. Karin writes, "I understand needing to provide accommodations to people with physical disabilities—but realizing there may be a framework to assist me with a mental disability is the next step in my journey." Have you ever tried to get an accommodation for your mental health challenges? Were you successful? What challenges did you come across in trying to get an accommodation? How has the accommodation helped you? If you have not tried to get an accommodation, why not?

### ***A Portrait of Trauma***

Armando Quiñones-Cruz, Puerto Rico

1. In the early stages of seeking treatment, Armando writes, "The doctor would change the diagnoses every other month from post-traumatic stress disorder, borderline personality, bipolar disorder, and general anxiety. This constant change and unstructured therapy made me skeptical and wary, missing a lot of appointments and medications." Did you experience these difficulties? How can mental health providers better support patients and families during the time when they are waiting to get a correct diagnosis?
2. Armando says, "[R]ecovery is an ongoing effort." In the context of mental health challenges, what does recovery mean to you? Is curing mental health challenges possible? If so, how? If not, why not?

## ***A Soldier's Unseen Scars***

Jason Jepson, United States of America

1. At one point, Jason's parents called the police because he had become a danger to himself and to others. Talk about a time when a family member or friend called the police (or almost called the police) because of a mental health crisis. How did they handle the situation? Was this a positive or negative experience with law enforcement?
2. Although Jason is now "in recovery" and is learning to live with his mental health challenges, he writes in his poem: "There is still fear." As someone living with mental health challenges, what fears do you have? How do you address these fears so that you can "live out loud?"

## ***Half Dead***

Jessica Morgan, United States of America

1. Jessica writes, "I grew up not understanding what mental health was....When I thought of mental health, I didn't see my face." In your opinion, how do we address this lack of education and awareness in our everyday life? How do we make mental healthcare and mental health challenges more visible?
2. Jessica says, "I wanted to adhere to the strong Black woman archetype so bad. I wanted to be superwoman, but I couldn't." What archetypes or stereotypes prevented you from seeking mental health care? How do we break down these stereotypes to make mental health care more accessible, both socially and practically?

## ***Embodying Bipolar***

Julia Knopes, United States of America

1. Julia explains, "My family's socioeconomic status buffered my disability so that I could function, allowing me to spend summers and evenings without employment, free to rest. Privilege softens the ground upon which people with mental illness fall, but if one is dropped from the towering heights of mania, they will still shatter when they land." How has your race, culture, or class helped or hindered your ability to function while living with mental health challenges? What systemic issues need to be addressed so that all people, regardless of status or privilege, have access to mental health resources?
2. Julia was "willing to attend therapy" because "it felt characteristic of liberal, educated white women like myself: listening to NPR, sipping water out of reusable bottles, paying for the luxury of professional validation." Was there a time when you were "going through the motions" of treatment but were not yet ready to confront the reality of your serious mental health challenge? How did you move beyond seeking "professional validation" to meaningful change?

## ***Seeking Balance and Recovery in a Life Near People Who Care***

Nikolaos Kougioumtzis Stopy (Translation by Valentini Bochtsou), Greece

1. Nikolaos worked in a vocational agriculture program for many years and found the work fulfilling. What programs or resources (beyond psychotropic medication) have you found helpful? What did you find valuable from these types of programs?
2. For Nikolaos, sharing his story is an important part of his healing journey. In what ways are you discouraged from sharing your story? In what ways are you encouraged? Share your story with your group in as much detail as you would like, then reflect on that experience. What was helpful about sharing? What was difficult?

## ***Your Unique and Beautiful Brain***

Sara Schley, United States of America

1. During a crisis, Sara calls her "brain buddy," and they make plans for immediate next steps. What are the steps in your crisis plan? How might you implement a "brain buddy" in your own crisis plan?
2. Sara discusses the importance of gratitude, discipline, and compassion on her journey to recovery. What role do gratitude, discipline, and compassion play in your life and in your pursuit of recovery?

## ***On Suicide and Survival***

Anonymous Two, United States of America

1. When their depressive symptoms began, Anonymous Two tried to believe "I can get through this on my own." In what ways did you exhibit a similar belief? What prompted you to finally seek help?
2. Anonymous Two writes, "Admitting that I needed psychiatric hospitalization felt like I had hit rock bottom. I cried not because I was so depressed, but because I felt like I had failed." Why would having mental health challenges be seen as "failing", and how do we get rid of this view?

## ***Behind the Iron Curtain of Duty***

Monica Gupta, India

1. Monica writes of her friends, "Their non-judgmental approach, perseverance, and constant assistance helped me regain my lost world." What qualities or values do you find most important in friends or family members who support you? Have any of your friendships or relationships with family been strained because of your mental health challenges? If so, in what way?
2. After "being on an emotional roller coaster" for seven years, Monica "realized the power of surrender." What do you think she means by this? What does the power of surrender look like in your own life as someone living with mental health challenges?

## **Double Life**

Samantha René Merriwether, United States of America

1. Samantha writes, "Currently our mental health system is set up to put people in boxes and label them, which makes it even harder to get help. It is limited by how you fit in the box and what type of treatment you qualify for in conjunction with your insurance." To what extent do you agree with Samantha's assessment? How do we move beyond "labeling" to help those living with mental health challenges?
2. Samantha talks about "being her own advocate" and "learning new ways of coping." In what ways have you had to be your own advocate?

## **Second Changes for Bipolar Women: Coming Out of the Dark, a Life Under Construction**

Imelda Caravaca Ferrer, The Philippines

1. For Imelda, writing and poetry are important aspects of her healing journey, and many of the authors included poetry in their stories. How, if at all, is art a healing therapy for you?
2. Imelda writes, "people are afraid of things and people they don't understand." As a society, how might we improve awareness and understanding of people living with mental health challenges? What could you do as an individual to improve other peoples' awareness and understanding about mental health challenges?