



To the Committee Secretary- Parliament House

Craig Hamilton - Bipolar Disorder and Depression- My Story

In September 2000 I was admitted to a Psychiatric Hospital for two weeks after suffering a psychotic episode at Broadmeadow Railway Station in Newcastle.

For three days I was in the maximum security lock down ward after being scheduled under the Mental Health act.

The subsequent diagnosis from the team at the James Fletcher Hospital was Bipolar 1 Disorder.

In the years since that traumatic time I have had time to reflect on a great deal about the illness and the best way to manage it and stay well.

Bipolar Disorder, like so many other mental illnesses has a stigma associated with it that makes management of the condition even more difficult than it should be.

For many people with Bipolar Disorder, managing the illness and coming to terms with the sometimes severe mood swings is something managed in secrecy, away from the prying eyes of even close friends and family.

My experience with the illness in 2000 was so traumatic and debilitating that upon recovery I felt almost duty bound to speak up about Bipolar Disorder and attempt to decrease the level of stigma around this illness.

Today, I am still working for ABC Radio in Newcastle, who were my employers back in 2000 when the world that I knew went pear shaped for over a year.

I am never complacent about this illness because I have seen the devastation Bipolar Disorder can wreak when out of control, so I am constantly aware of the way I live my life.

Meditation , managing stress levels, monitoring sleep patterns, medication, relaxation, moderate alcohol consumption and exercise are all part of a management strategy that I have put in place to make sure that the events of 2000 are never repeated.

This illness effects more people in Australia and around the world than many people realise.

When Bipolar Disorder makes the news , it's usually a bad news story.

In recent years we have seen again the havoc Bipolar Disorder can create with a suicide for those affected with the illness still something like 1 in 5.

In 2004 I published my story in a book called "Broken Open" with friend and journalist Neil Jameson.

The story was more than anything a plea to society to drop the stigma associated with mental illness and make it easier for those that needed help to be able to reach out and get it.

You see, there are two groups of people in Australia:

1. Those that believe they will never be affected by mental illness

2. Those that are in the grip of a mental illness and struggling to deal with it

I reckon I can speak on behalf of both groups because I have been in both groups.

If you had said to me prior to 2000 , who would be the *LAST* person in the world who could be so badly depressed that getting out of bed in the morning was impossible and that the level of depression would lead to thoughts of suicide, I would have said me.

Yet there I was, in the deepest , blackest , darkest place I have ever been in my life with basically no real hope of getting out of there.

I now know more about this thing called depression, this thing called mania , bipolar disorder, chemical imbalance in the brain etc.

Knowledge really is power.

So many people are suffering with a variety of mental illnesses in our community , yet do not receive the help they need because of inadequate resources and inadequate educational programs for those in need of Mental Health services.

In my experience Bipolar Disorder needs to be managed with self-awareness, medication, yoga, regular exercise and a holistic approach to staying fit and healthy.

My self-awareness is simply more finely tuned today to my stress levels and when I need to pull back, slow down and rest I do.

In the area of mental health and public advocacy, I simply want to make a positive difference.

When my book "Broken Open" was written I hoped the book would not only help to further de-stigmatise mental illness but provide some guidelines for those people and their families who were going to walk the same path that I have.

Today I look back on the book with a great deal of satisfaction. It is helping others but there is still much more to do.

I will continue to tell my story and hopefully change some fundamental attitudes that are long overdue for change.

I hereby submit my book "Broken Open" to the Senate Enquiry into Suicide in Australia.

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