

JOURNEY WITH BIPOLAR

Growth was mandatory. Happiness is contingent.



Audrey M. Marcum

For those who could use a success story

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FOREWORD

Started and stopped numerous times, without a deadline the book would never be ready. My name is Audrey Mengyang Marcum and I am on an ongoing journey with Bipolar Disorder.

Split into three sections for easy reference: Part I chronicles my personal journey; Part II zooms in to specific strategies; Part III zooms out to four mind models. Read separately or sequentially, I hope one or more parts may prove useful.

PART I: MY JOURNEY

Trials and tribulations

*I've had my share.
There ain't nothin' gonna stop me now
'Cause I'm almost there.*

- *Tiana from Princess and the Frog*

CHAPTER 1: CHILDHOOD

My parents were serious career types when I was born. Dad was a hot shot college graduate from the top foreign language institute in China. Mom was the rising star in the Department of Engineering.

I was a parent pleaser from when I was very little. There is no trying half-heartedly. That's called slacking off. Either I could make my parents proud of me or I couldn't.

**_*_

Many people initially mistake me for a Type A perfectionist. Quiz after quiz, test after test, my "carelessness" continued to lose me points. I cared and double checked my work. Attaining perfection was just not in my stars. Eventually, I've accepted that perfect is not something I can achieve and I must learn to allow myself to be happy with hitting "good enough." Greatness was not within my reach because my definition of great was perfect. I was a tried and failed perfectionist. It's still difficult to not aim for perfection but remembering the purpose helps me not get stuck in the ego of perfection. This is my story.

CHAPTER 2: RISE OF SELF-IMPORTANCE

Going into middle school, my dad worked for a year in New York City. In May of 1997 he found Falun Gong, the biggest fad in China since communism. The ethical and the mystical—I bought into all of it. The best part of all of this was I achieved greatness easily.

My “high score” for sitting in the full lotus meditation position was 2.5 hours. Very soon, I was someone who regularly taught the exercises to others or was the assistant who helped correct posture.

Compared to other Chinese children in the U.S., I was in the top 1% for Chinese fluency. Living in Boston, where there was a sizeable population of people who met weekly for group study 25% only spoke Chinese and another 25% who only spoke English; I had plenty of opportunities to practice simultaneous translation. Every year, new opportunities for translation would come up whether it’s to translate poetry, news articles, or personal testimonials.

My delusions of grandeur continued to grow as I became a youth spokesperson for the group. I was a self-righteous activist who took my admittance to Dartmouth for granted. College was my opportunity to start fresh after years of not fitting in at this private prep school. I will now be amongst peers who were equally excited and deserving at this new beginning.

CHAPTER 3: WILD

College was awesome. Everyone was so smart. I belonged. There was no need to try to be better than people because I'd made it. There was no more reason to compete. I was so happy to be part of this group of people who respected the intelligence of everyone around them. Beyond that, I felt pretty. It's really fun to feel pretty. This is especially true when the last time you'd felt like you were pretty was 8 years ago.

My wild chapter of all-out glory lasted through orientation week and then the first day of school.

CHAPTER 4: BATTLES LOST

Episode 1: Surprise roommate

Excitement of orientation week and the first day of classes ended with paranoia about poison. As my headache became worse, I asked my new floor mates gathered in the suite common area for help. My gratitude goes to the half-dozen in that room who walked me across campus to the student health center. Thanks to the nurse on staff, I was transferred to the medical center shortly after.

Hospital Stay #1: Dartmouth Hitchcock Medical Center

Length of Stay: 5 days

Favorite moment: Another patient made me a dreamcatcher.

Least favorite moment: *Running at full speed at a single person couch to shove it away because "it was angry and was about to explode."*

Result: *My brain was mush after aggressive medication. Medical leave for the rest of fall quarter.*

Learned: *I have bipolar disorder. Bipolar can be subdued with medication. Side effects suck.*

Episode 2: Not a fluke

Winter quarter passed without incident. Over spring break I traveled with my parents first to Geneva to protest outside the U.N. and then to France for a whirlwind tourist stint—Louvre, Versailles and a quick photo under the Eiffel Tower. My sleep schedule was out of whack again coming back for Spring term.

Two weeks later, I was paranoid once again retriggered by the same fear. Campus security reached out to see if I'd feel safer at the hospital and I said yes.

Hospital Stay #2: Dartmouth Hitchcock Medical Center

Length of Stay: ~8 days

Favorite moment: *Another patient gave me his bottled water after I panicked about water being infused with chemicals.*

Least favorite moment: *Suffering three unsuccessful blood draw attempts by the same person before I asked her to stop so someone else could try.*

Result: *Spring and Summer terms were lost to medical leave number two.*

Learned: *Psychiatric cocktails adding 50 pounds to my weight still didn't keep me out of the hospital.*

Episode 3: Shit got real

Yes. I. Did. Medical Leave #3.

And Yes. Dartmouth. Did. Dartmouth let me back. They helped me back.

I went for the stereotypical “mind over matter, flush you bitches down the toilet” medication regimen.

During those 6 months between my first two hospital stays, I suffered drowsiness, nausea, weight gain, facial twitches, t-rex/jerky/shaking hands and lest we forget, a mushy brain. I saw no benefit and therefore there must have not been any benefit. I'm a smart girl. I will reason myself out of paranoia next time.

Hospital Stay #3: Somerville Hospital 3rd Floor

Length of Stay: ~12 days

Intermission: Home

Length of Stay: ~12 days

Hospital Stay #4: Somerville Hospital 4th Floor

Length of Stay: ~12 days

Least favorite moment:

1. Pure terror of a witch was out to get me.

Benefit: Scared the living daylights out of me.

Three quarters lost this time. Winter 2004. Spring 2004. Summer 2004.

When I was first hospitalized, the doctors told us that the episodes get worse every time. Arrogant me thought I didn't know episode #1 was coming and then for episode #2 I just wasn't prepared.

The first two rounds of paranoia were tame as compared to the third round double hospitalizations. There was an intermission between hospital stays 3 and 4 because for a week the hospital staff was keeping my parents from coming to see me because they let a completely delusional patient decide to not see her parents. Parents had to threaten to sue before they were allowed to see me. I was plenty happy to see my parents when they did come. Unfortunately, I was still delusional during the week or so of intermission. When the check-up came again I told the doctor that I knew I was sick again and everyone agreed I needed to go back. At least this time I was put on the fourth floor. The patients I met on the fourth floor shared third floor was worse.

Medical Leave #1: Fall 2002

Medical Leave #2: Spring 2003, Summer 2003

Medical Leave #3: Winter 2004, Spring 2004, Summer 2004

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Medical Leave #1: 5 days

Medical Leave #2: 8 days

Medical Leave #3: 30+ days

My episodes were worse each time. Three is a trend. I couldn't afford to get sick again. Another bout of mania and I may not return to school. I may not return to sanity.

I took my meds. I checked-in with my assistant dean. I just wanted to graduate and so took the road that was paved—economics—rather than the road unknown but initially

planned. I will always mourn for what might have been but if given the opportunity to choose again, my choice would have been the same. Play it safe and graduate. 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008.

I graduated in March of 2008.

CHAPTER 5: ONE MORE BATTLE LOST

Nine months after graduation, I was back in the hospital. Another double stay situation, I had stopped taking meds after 4 years of being well because graduation took me off my parents' plan but my new job's health insurance had a 6 month waiting period for pre-existing conditions. The medication I was on was about \$1200 out of pocket (per month).

Fortunately for me, the new psychiatrist I worked with was an expert in his field and after asking me to detail what happened before each episode pointed out to me that loss of sleep a common factor. At this point, I had admission offers from a few different law schools but I genuinely did not know if my 70% speed brain would be able to handle it and whether it'd be possible to have a normal life.

Paraphrased, my doctor said:

Audrey. You have a physical illness that requires you to take medication and to have a bedtime. You can do fine in law school. No one will notice that your brain isn't at your previous normal full speed. You won't be the person who's able to go to a bar and party until 2. You won't be the person who argues in front of the Supreme Court. There are plenty of lawyers who don't argue in front of Supreme Court. You can go to law school. You can graduate and still be a great lawyer.

2009 was the last time I was hospitalized.

**_*_*_

It has not been smooth sailing and there were a few close calls. Learning and growing is how I keep ahead of the curve. Knowing that I cannot afford to get sick again means I will continue to adjust myself so I can continue to be myself. I am ever vigilant for warning signs, actively manage my moods and actions that tend to push me in either direction, and enjoy the life and people that I'm fortunate enough to have.

CHAPTER 6: SKIRMISHES

One of the benefits of going to law school was I now had student health insurance. Ironically, the student health clinic admin told me about applying for charity medication from the pharmaceutical company because my student health care would not cover more than 2.5 months of my prescribed medication. For the next three years, I received 3 month supplies of Geodon and Lamictal in the mail.

-~_-~_-

Law school was the first time I had a defined bedtime. 9PM on the dot I would be taking my night meds. If I hadn't fallen asleep by 1, 80% of the time what was keeping me up was physical discomfort from withdrawal!

-~_-~_-

I started playing the piano again in law school because I discovered it was a pleasant way to spend an hour or so after waking up 4 hours before a 9AM exam and finish playing as other folks started trickling into the law school lounge at 7:30. I'd never been a consenting early riser but the stress of law school exams made sure I was well awake before the 3 or 4 hour exams. I didn't know it then but 5 years later piano would be one of the relaxation techniques I regularly used as part of my anti-bipolar art of war.

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My husband and I met at a ball. Law schools, much like high schools, have a yearly dance cleverly named Barrister's Ball. It's an opportunity for law students who at this point are all over the legal drinking age to get into prom dresses and suits plus alcohol.

We did not get to say more than hello and shake hands because by the time he asked our mutual friend about introducing us, I'd already left for the night. See, besides this being the first time my husband and I officially met, I also had a meds issue that day.

I took my meds 4 hours early at 5 instead of 9 because the mini-purse I was going to bring was hardly big enough for my phone and I didn't know single-serving meds boxes existed back then. Immediately after dinner and before we'd yet gotten into the drink

line (2 drink tickets with admission), I had to bail on my friend and go home and sleep off essentially a mini-overdose.

CHAPTER 7: BATTLE WON

The first time I won a battle with visible danger was January 2017. Work had been very busy over the previous twelve months. It had been especially difficult in the past 4 weeks of the year since there were only 3 of us manager to cycle time off with. Constant stress was leading to insomnia and fatigue. I was falling over, dropping my phone in the snow, and forgetting my keys more frequently than usual.

Friday afternoon before the college football national title game I was coming home and spilled a drink all over myself as I was getting home. It struck me in that moment that another episode was coming and I needed to take immediate action to prevent it from putting me out of commission. After coming inside I called my husband—

“Hi, I am feeling very poorly and can feel an episode coming on and need to put myself on lockdown immediately. While I am still lucid I need you to listen very closely to my plan. First—please bring home: Burger King—my usual two whoppers and a large fry. At Kroger, would you please get 4 tomatoes, a package of mini-pizzas, canned soup, spaghetti, pasta sauce, and a few oranges? I need to ban myself from the phone except for if you call before you get home. In the meantime, I need to ban myself from anything with screens and reevaluate if we need to change this approach. If you see me losing my grip on reality, I trust you to make the judgement call of whether I need to go to the hospital. I will try to nap now until you get home. I love you.”

What I felt that day was the final crash that would have led to an out of control spiral if I hadn't put the brakes on. This was the first time I'd been aware of the oncoming episode and the first time Larry had been around. There was no precedent yet for me coming out of one of these without getting delusional and an extensive hospital stay.

After going a 90 minute scavenger hunt, Larry was home. I was terrified of losing my grip on reality but more terrified of how long it'd be until I can claw my way back and the implications it would have on the rest of my life to include my marriage and my career. Work was going well, stressful but rewarding.

I was able to set up time to meet my psychiatrist on Tuesday. By then, the brunt of the hurricane had already passed and it was about picking up the pieces. Of course, all of

this was brand new so I did not know precisely when I was out of danger as the storm unfolded.

On Saturday, I let my manager know that I was feeling very sick and will be seeing my doctor on Tuesday to evaluate when I'd be able to come in and asked that he let my team know. Then I put on an out of office without a specific return date because I had no idea what was coming around the next corner or where I'd be on Sunday, much less Tuesday.

On Saturday, I lifted my complete ban of text and allowed myself to read. On Sunday, I lifted my ban on screens. I was also feeling well enough now to go to the art store with Larry to get myself a simplistic colored pencil set. My training from the last pair of hospitalizations paid off because I remembered that crafts was one of the things that was low-intensity on the brain while allowing my brain to relax. By Sunday afternoon, we knew the danger had passed and Monday morning I forced myself to wake up at roughly the usual time to practice getting back to normal.

By Tuesday, when I met with my psychiatrist she said I did well to engage in lockdown on Friday and that she'd be comfortable with me working a half day on Wednesday and then full days again on Thursday if Wednesday went well.

Overall, I only missed one extra day of work than originally planned (I was already going to take the Tuesday after the national title game off). It was dreadful not knowing whether the measures I put into place would be enough because I did not know how close to the brink I was and whether I noticed too late for my strategies to keep me based in reality. This was when I really started to pay attention again to my moods and energy levels. It was also when I first started to seriously put thoughts into writing this book. The years of vigilance was put to the test. My defenses held.

CHAPTER 8: BATTLE TWO WON

In November 2018, under two years since the first major battle won, I had another close call. After a grueling two months before the launch of a big systems change at work, that Thursday night I could not sleep at all. What I should have done was call in sick and then sleep in. What I didn't do was just that. I texted my manager, told her I was doing poorly and was only going to come in and finish an email I wasn't able to get done the previous day before going home. The illusion of my coming to work gave the impression that I was better than I was and the indignation of my running out at 10AM was a bit much as I shut down to go home, not knowing if I'd be back on Monday. I wasn't.

Having successfully fought Battle One, I knew what I needed to do and I had more time to plan for more defenses. Larry was given the "I'm getting sick and while I'm still fully aware, here's what I think you should do" speech again. I had a fuller list of food I asked him to buy this time—it was chock full of carbs, spaghetti, meatballs, sauce, hash browns, canned soup, fruit and more fruit. While he went to stock up on food, I tried to nap. My brain was operating at what felt to be approximately 30% power to me—things were just not processing at anything close to normal speed. From Larry's outsider point of view, I was talking slightly slower than usual. In a literal way, I handed my phone to Larry and told him I was going to trust his decision as to when I get the phone back.

By Saturday afternoon, both Larry and I knew I was out of the woods. I went with him to the grocery store on Saturday and sat in the car asking him to get me an easy jigsaw puzzle. When I said easy, in my mind that meant a 50 piece puzzle but he ended up bringing home this gorgeous set of 5 Disney puzzles, smallest one was 300 pieces. That's alright. I did that same Inside Out puzzle 5 times in the next 4 days.

During the first 24 hours of this scare, I also drew a few magic marker pictures and practiced elementary calligraphy with magic markers. I discovered that in my weakened state Green Eggs and Ham had too many words. In preparation of the next close call, I bought The Hungry Hungry Caterpillar.

That early morning when I couldn't sleep, I played some piano and meditated for a little bit too. Our dog Darwin always keeps very close when I am not feeling well and plopped his body between me and the front door while I meditated in the living room.

I scheduled an appointment with my San Antonio psychiatrist and laid the cards on the table for her to evaluate. My thoughts were that I may need additional / adjusted medication considering I had two back-to-back close calls in under two years.

What I learned from this second close call was I needed to set boundaries for myself for how I determine how much work is too much work. If I don't set boundaries for myself, no one is going to set them for me. The decision to go to work that day was a mistake and it could have cost me everything—for what? I wasn't saving the world. Nothing is worth putting me, my husband and my family through the loss of my sanity.

CHAPTER 9: GAME ON

In the past 8 chapters I've referred to bipolar disorder as an unwelcome roommate and an opponent in battle. With each year without a hospitalization and with each close call handled more confidently, I'm ok with shifting my perspective again to that of "friendly" but competitive roommates—except I always win now. I've won for 10 years in a row now. Take that!

I have you handled bipolar. Not only that, I started sharing my success story in September 2018 as part of my workplace's mental health awareness campaign. A month later, I transformed my short piece into a 5 minute Toastmasters speech. In May, as part of mental health awareness month, I was the speaker in a moderated chat cosponsored by the business resource group celebrating Asian culture and the business resource group supporting individuals with disabilities and those who cared for others who had disabilities. The chat was livestreamed and heavily advertised locally.

Going into the chat, I was terrified. Never have I ever done a question and answer about bipolar. Never have I watched someone else do it. Never have I ever purposefully slapped a big "I have bipolar" sticker on my forehead knowing I will have an audience of more than a few.

This was the single biggest decision to do what I thought was right for me at that point in time despite the obvious invitation for stigma. I knew I was doing the right thing going in because the world was so bleak for so long and there were next to none success stories that gave me much hope. Unlike a number of folks for whom it would be a decision whether they'd give up bipolar or keep it, the first hospitalization and paranoia during the episode alone meant there would be no decision to make. Yes, I'd get rid of bipolar. Yes, I don't care that I may be a little less bright and a little less creative. I can live with that. What's important for me is to live.

I can live. I will live. I am putting down my story in words so it can reach more people. Techniques are all well and good but if you'd never heard a success story, who knows if they're any use? I choose to once again self-identify to a wider audience because there is nothing more frightening than fighting a forest fire on your island and not knowing if

any other islands are out there and if any other islands were surviving. This one is. My island's thriving.

PART II: MY PREPARATIONS

In the operations of war, where there are in the field a thousand swift chariots, as many heavy chariots, and a hundred thousand mail-clad soldiers, with provisions enough to carry them a thousand li, the expenditure at home and at the front, including entertainment of guests, small items such as glue and paint, and sums spent on chariots and armor, will reach the total of a thousand ounces of silver per day. Such is the cost of raising an army of 100,000 men.

- *Art of War*

OVERVIEW

Once I accepted my bipolar condition as something I needed to learn to live with, like any other unwelcome roommate I gathered strategies that I hope may be useful for others like me.

CHAPTER 1: HAPPY PLACES

Places of refuge are important. I think of these as my pillow forts. Everyone has different preferences and triggers so I suggest using this that give you the most secure and peaceful.

There are three general types I think of as happy places - - physical spaces, relational spaces, and mental spaces. We'll address each in turn.

Physical Happy Places

First, physical spaces will include many different areas of comfort and psychological safety at home, at work or potentially in public spaces. Continue to build the spaces at home or in your work area as well as discover new safe houses at work.

Some examples of my physical happy places at home include: places to read or write (5 positions in the couch, a reading corner in the study, my desk in the bedroom; Place to watch happy movies, favorite shows and play video games is in front of the TV but can also be space that is transformed for fun activities (see section below). Bathroom can also be a refuge depending on the day whether it's a refreshing shower or a lazy bath. A comfortable bed will also go a long way.

At work, my desk is almost the only place I'd specifically rule out as a physical happy place. There are many alcoves that I eat lunch at depending on the temperature outside, my available time (I was perfectly happy making myself a sandwich at the bottom of a stairwell once when lunch that day was 8 minutes). During breaks I usually find myself a mostly quiet seating area close by to read, draw, listen to learning videos, drink tea or meditate. When the weather permits, which is almost always in Southern Texas, I sit outside and it's a picnic every day. Depending on the nature of my food, I may sit on a bench but typically I bring a really pink plastic bag to sit on. There is of course also the simple walk around the building or outside option too. Designate your happy places intentionally. For them to be effective, you should be able to remember at least 2 to 3 options when your bipolar decides to make its presence known.

Other physical happy places include spots in the back or front yard, local parks, libraries, and other places you will not be tempted to over spend. Perhaps your car or garage can also be happy places.

As part of physical happy places, where you can decorate whether it's a corner of an apartment, your bedroom or work cubicle do so with things that you enjoy. Blankets and pillows lend a lot to a cozy corner. My husband and I put up twinkle lights in our sunroom and living /dining areas which run around the tops of the ceiling with an extra lengths framing the kitchen opening into the living /dining area in two wide U-shaped dips.

Relational Happy Places

Relational happy places are tied closely to people and support networks. One thing to keep in mind is that it costs others a lot of energy to support you and worry about you so spread that across your support network and medical personnel. It isn't fair and it's selfish to only lean on one or two people in your life. The other part of this too that I'd like to emphasize is no one is entitled to being a jerk to other people. You should not and cannot expect leniency from those close to you without remorse of your part.

If you have access to an employee assistance program at your workplace or through a family member's company, it's a tremendous resource. I've used EAP as 5-session 1-on-1 classes to work on skills that will help reduce/manage stress. These skillsets help me maintain my sanity in a very real way.

Mental Happy Spaces

Deliberate use of time has been hugely important. My purpose for minding what I focus on is not productivity. Productivity is a means and not the end itself. What is important to me is as Shifu in Kungfu Panda says "Inner peace." I describe my happiest form of emotion for me is a contentment that I did good.

What brings different people to their mental happy space will be different and may evolve as new methods crowd out previous ones. Many activities that bring me peace include playing the piano, going on a walk, watching Master Chef on Hulu, playing with

the dog, eating porridge, listening to music, water color, paint, sketching, writing from journal prompts, looking outside the window, reading, meditation, rock climbing, jigsaw puzzles. There is a large variety of activities that bring me to a mental happy space— how do I get anything done?

Outside the habit of having a specific bedtime, as a whole habit building is not something that works very well for me. The reason I am not a fan of habits is because it limits me to routine, routine is boring and boring things make me depressed and frustrated.

If habit building is good for you, go for it! It's really freeing to realize that you can create your own rules about what is fun. You own your own time.

CHAPTER 2: ARMOR AND TALISMAN

There is something to be said for the people who dress up to go to the theatre or folks who have legit running gear. Clothes that make you happy are clothes that make you feel good about yourself—safe. Minimizing emotional turmoil is front and center of everything I do. Outside your safe spaces, you can carry with you anchors or talismans of safety.

Armor

Mondays through Fridays military fatigues for me consist of a work dress, cardigan, mini boots and bracelet. My legs are short for my 5'7" frame so dresses give me the confidence I do not get with pants. It took a long time for me to get over the "fat girl mentality." Pretty dresses were a huge part of me accepting that I really wasn't 150 pounds any more. Bright colors put me in happy moods whether it's someone else wearing it or myself.

I own the same pair of boots in black and tan. They are just as important for my ensemble. The clickity clackity what the fat-heeled boots make me feel confident speed walking from one end of the building to the other without the fear of falling over.

As for bracelets, I own about a dozen and cycle through them depending on what strength I want to bring with me to work that day. Do I want to wear my PRIDE bracelet that day because I want to feel connected to the rest of the people at work, LGBT or just those who support the LGBT community? Is this a flaunt your roots by wearing the cloisonné bracelet I got from my parents' neighbors for Christmas some years ago? How about the bracelet gifted by a former direct report after you were no longer her manager? The set of bracelets from the cutest Asian lady you worked with when you were about to leave the city?

Talismans

When I think of protective objects, I think of the protection in term of what the item means to me and what it does for me. As a woman, having a purse is expected. What

we choose to put in them is another matter. I pretty much always have a book in mine. Headphones are another item that I like to have available as well as a small drawing pad for doodling purposes. Cough drops and tissues are another must for me. When I start coughing the solutions are either a cough drop or a quart of water.

Dasani bottles were my MO for a long time. I never dealt well with being thirsty so having one ready on hand means peace of mind. Over the past couple years of living on the third floor, we started using water bottles instead. Bubba bottles have been a godsend and we never go anywhere without them.

After marrying my husband, I started stealing his hoodies. It wasn't just that they were comfortable. More so, wearing the hoodies make me feel like I'm being hugged by him. Safety blanket as you will. In the summer, I have a hoodie that goes with me everywhere except work. On off, on off—ironically, the hoodie goes on when we get in the car and when we get into a shop or restaurant. I've come to realize that my standard for what a comfortable temperature is not the same as that of many others. After all, I spend all of 2L summer without having to turn on the A/C once. 80 degrees indoors wasn't something to bear, it was plenty comfortable with a fan.

CHAPTER 3: WARNING SIGNS

The warning signs portion of my arsenal has been one that has been beefed up significantly over the past 10 years.

Insomnia

Oldie and goodie was the one the Cleveland doctor helped identify—before every episode, I lost a lot of sleep. If I do not sleep the previous night, I call off work and sleep. My bedtime all through law school was midnight. Nowadays the bedtime is no longer as strict but I absolutely pay particular attention to bedtimes and watch when I start waking up early. The other main tactic is to not be ashamed or frustrated at having to use sleep tactics. Many times I end up keeping myself up because I was not happy at having to get up and doing sleep tactics other folks don't typically have to do.

Some data I read on the internet that 40% of all adults experience regular insomnia. Perhaps my techniques can help more people than previously thought. I no longer have chronic insomnia.

Strategies

Seraquil: an anti-psychotic that causes 10% of patients to experience drowsiness. Seraquil hits me particularly hard and will knock me out within 15 minutes if I focus on not ruminating and only on falling asleep on the 25mg dose. I've been proscribed Seraquil as a sleeping aid and typically do not finish my 10 dose prescription before a year is up.

Extended release melatonin was added to my arsenal in 2016 when I was having trouble staying asleep (waking up at 4AM).

Food—specifically miniature pizzas are a go-to when I get hungry in bed. For some time, I'd be hungry and then be mad at my hunger and refuse to get up and eat more. I eat a lot of calories every day (probably in the 3000 range) and I can get frustrated at getting hungry again. On the manic ends, I eat even more than usual. What I discovered was

that there is zero point in begrudging myself food because I didn't want to get up or because I was mad at my body for making me hungry yet again. Might as well just eat, get it over with and hopefully fall asleep soon.

Changing location of sleep. There have been a handful of times where I got up and resituated onto the living room couch. I average 2 naps per weekend so at times when the bed comes associated with not falling asleep I'd move to the couch instead.

Meditation—I've used meditation in a bunch of different ways as it relates to sleep. Really it's whatever suited my fancy that day. I have focused my attention on different body parts and released the tension steadiness throughout my body. I've gotten out of bed and meditated in half-lotus / full-lotus positions listening to Buddhist music.

Breathing exercises with a mantra of "sleeeeeep."

Shower—depending on the day, I either shower in the morning or take a bath/shower at night. If I am feeling icky at night, an easy fix is to have another shower where the sole purpose is to feel clean and warm.

Piano—since we got an electric piano, I play it a lot more both in the evening and in the morning before work. Since I can lower the volume, I can put the piano (keyboard that almost feels like a real piano) just loud enough for me to hear but not loud enough to disturb my husband's sleep in the next room.

Busy Spree

As a whole, busy sprees can best be identified by furious cleaning and tidying series of events. In general, I enjoy cleanliness but not enough to keep up the cleanliness on a regular basis. It's very obvious when I start going on a declutter campaign.

Difficulty with this one is to try to not go completely to the other end. What is the best balance between putting off putting away laundry and mass junking of random papers lying around.

Tactics

Listen to my husband, when he sees me going on a spree. I can usually also notice it but on a time delay.

Attempt to find moderations but when in doubt, I always error toward less cleaning. Mental health is ultimately more important than germs.

Park it. It's quiet time now, whether that means watching a show, drawing/painting or reading a book.

Poopy Spells

The episodes that led to hospitalizations were all mixed episodes but what puts me in the hospital is always mania. My mini-depressive spells are mostly a lack of my usually bubbly self. Other symptoms include excessive napping and generally a droopiness that's unusual to my personality.

Tricks

Activities that wake me up and engage me mentally is how to counteract poopiness. This usually means stopping whatever I was doing that was making me poopy. By the time the poopiness is noticed, usually I'd gotten stuck doing the same thing a few a while. Even when that activity is fun (watching a show, reading a book), when there is little variation there is too much of a good thing. The same book that I rave about for a few days might get me down if I read it in 1 sitting with hardly a break in the middle.

Changing the paradigm is how to beat the poopiness. My downturn is usually related to some emotional turmoil but there are ways to make things a bit better.

One of the more recent things I learned was that it is ok to accept the suffering and to remind myself that I am not alone in my suffering and that others also suffer too. It gives me perspective that helps shrink the suffering. Learning that I'm allowed to feel the negative feelings has really freed me. To turn from negative to positive, however, requires a redirection/reset.

Literally the best reset button to press is a nap. I know that everything looks better after a nap and I am not someone who feels worse after a nap. Second best is a bath or a shower. Outside of that there's going outside and doing something even if it's just a walk with a dog or a stroll in the local supermarket.

If I'm really low energy, the switch may be to something even more low energy like drawing with markers or reading *The Hungry Hungry Caterpillar*. From the outside it would look odd for a grown woman to read the *Hungry Hungry Caterpillar* but my husband has witness my bunkering down twice in the past 4 years where I saw episodes brewing and took immediate action to keep it from sending me into delusions that can only result in hospitalization.

Falling Over / Misplacing Items

These two symptoms typically go hand in hand with each other. They are manifestations of the same underlying running out of attention span to complete daily base-line functions.

I have been clumsy my whole life and have always been someone who misplaced things so this warning flag was not one that I recognized until the last year. The difficulty in both of these symptoms is to distinguish between normal state clumsy and elevated state clumsy.

Falling down once and hitting your face to the corner of a wall can be just a normal state clumsy. Falling down again the next day and skinning your knee is elevated state clumsy. Misplacing my phone in the house is normal state airhead. Misplacing my water bottles 5 times in the space of 2 hours is elevated state airhead.

Defenses

What I've figured about my bipolar is that it regularly overspends energy. When I'm on an upward swing (I'm 80% on the upswing by personality) I am more productive, get more done and am generally more motivated because I have even more energy than I usually do to spend.

After figuring out that the excessive falling over and the excessive airheadedness are a warning sign of a loss of moderation on energy expenditure, I now make an effort to evaluate whether the frequency of my clumsiness and the frequency of my airheadedness increases outside of my normal steady state.

CHAPTER 4: BEST PRACTICES

The section in particular is one that is evolving on a daily/weekly basis. In 2017, I was diagnosed with high blood pressure after a particularly busy (but not all that emotionally stressful) morning at work. I was not feeling my best and went down to have my blood pressure checked and it was in the 150-160s. The biggest driver of my bipolar is emotions and my emotions have been integrally tied to my reactions to stress, the sheer amount and types of stress and what I do to minimize the size and effect of that stress on my psyche.

Toolbox

A list that I'd put together during a happiness basket craft session in the hospital in 2009 was what are go-to activities when I am not feeling well.

1. Sleep
2. Nap
3. Bath
4. Shower
5. Listening to Music / Singing
6. Piano
7. Drawing
8. Walk
9. Eat
10. Hula Hoop

Other than Hula Hoop, which was eliminated from the list in 2011, all of the methods listed are still integral to my tool box. Many other tools were added to my tool box since 2009 but this initial tool box was important because it gave me a variety of options. In the moment, more likely than not, if I can remember just a few of these, it would be enough to get me through.

Expanded Arsenal

1. *Taking Lunch at work (2017)*

2. *Coloring (2017)*
3. *Writing (2017)*
4. *Meditation (2017)*
5. *Painting (2017)*
6. *Disney (2018)*
7. *Jigsaw Puzzles (2018)*

Pre-deciding / Setting Boundaries

Since 2017, I began to give myself deadlines for when I'd be out of the office. 6PM was a hard deadline and my daily goal was to hit the 5PM, 5:15PM, 5:30PM stop times I decide in the morning.

I like to see where my fancy takes me from hour to hour. In other words, I did not set firm deadlines for myself on when I need to shut down my work brain, did not set firm boundaries on how much I will allow others to give me and put my health at risk because of my lack of boundary management.

As far as averages go, I'm not a big procrastinator but unfinished tasks has been some of the things that clutter up my attention and add to the background stress. This is especially true when my energy is high because when my energy is high, I'm flooded with ideas and therefore to-do lists become clunky and I end up with to-do bullet-pointed essays. When there is already not enough space to put these ideas that I can't get to until morning, laundry that is not put away or pots are not washed same day become thoughts that weigh me down consciously or subconsciously.

Measures

Different organization techniques work for different people. Some of the ones that have worked to some extent and my primary method of organizing tasks include to-do lists on paper, to-do list apps, blocking out my calendar to focus on specific tasks, using spreadsheets to track my book of work, using a physical planner, using Microsoft OneNote...

The latest and greatest additions to these techniques are a physical Kanban board and colorful post-it notes, pre-deciding and start finishing mentalities for work and home.

The Kanban board reminds me that I can literally only work on one thing at a time helps me with setting those expectations in terms of how quickly I can get to something and if someone needs something done sooner that it would need to be a conversation with the people who I had already given commitments.

I didn't like to finish things because usually I treated the "finishing" part as the tedious part. Ultimately postponing the finish or sloppily completing mostly just leads to extra wait with no gain other than guilt during and after the postponement.

It's definitely a work in progress and I will never always do everything immediately because priorities are ever changing and I know I have to give myself the grace to deviate from the straight and narrow because the straight and narrow isn't even the best path forward.

Emotional Regulation

Understanding how to regulate my emotions has been very difficult until recently. When people think of mood swings (or what I thought of as mood swings) it was quick shifts from positive to negative. What I had going for me was intense mood blips.

Everything was either 100% the world is awesome or 100% I hate everything about my life. My emotional focus swayed as quickly as a single email, a single sentence or even a single word.

I blamed bad drivers for my bitterness on the roads. My days were often 100% ruined by the time I got home because of a bad 30-minute experience. This was neither fair to my husband and it was also a severe drain on me.

Countermeasures

Try to aim for perspective when the going gets tough. Remind myself that whatever is going on is all 100% not targeted at me. Someone told me once that every one of us is only a side character in other peoples' stories. Regardless of the initial emotion I may be feeling, I try to use the "Oh Fuck!" "Oh God!" "Oh well" "Ok" method from the book Just Listening. At this point, I know well enough that sending an email when I am emotionally changed does not help issues. For some, counting to ten or counting to a hundred can help. For some, trying to walk away for a bit can help or putting a certain

time lag in. For some, breathing techniques (whether it's 4-count in, 4-count hold, 4-count out, or 4-count hold or 5-count in, hold for 2 counts, 7-count out) is the best soothing technique. For me, what's worked best has been to try to move from helpless to, furious to resolved and finally to determined. Along the same lines, the word "pause" is easier for me to relate to than wait or step away.

Intentional Learning

Understanding how I best learn is something that is also ever evolving. While I primarily learn through reading, I discovered that there are other types of learning formats just as important.

Part of the reason my intentional study and practice cannot let up is because the environment at work is ever evolving and as I am evolving so is my husband. Not learning how to adapt is how I lose my grasp of my personal value of myself because if I don't adapt, I will get stressed out. If I don't adapt, I will make the folks around me more stressed out, which will lead me feeling stressed out and guilty. Ultimately, enough stress will literally put me in an episode and I won't risk going under and not finding my way back up.

Studies

Everyone learns differently. Habits have specifically not worked for me as a learning technique. My habits are more generalized guidelines instead of super specific tasks completed on a daily, weekly, monthly or yearly basis.

Variety and options is the key to how I learn.

My main source of studies are books—both fiction and non-fiction. A book is good when it tells a story that engages the emotion and divulges wisdom. I read science fiction and mystery, drama, poetry and short story. I also delight in insightful personal development books. More recently, I've started venturing into biographies and philosophy. Though I primarily read in English, my first and persistent favorite book is *Journey to the West*—a Chinese epic that uses beautiful poetry as garnish for comedic genius. My book reading habits have varied greatly through the years with the only consistency being I have consistently enjoyed reading as my favorite pastime. Until the

past two years, I rarely bought books because I'd rather borrow digital copies from amazing library collections. Currently, I've had the opportunity to discover amazing second-hand book stores with fantastic selections of classics and many rare (and affordable) finds no longer in print!

The second type of learning content I consume are online courses. Rosetta Stone is available for free from my library and in conjunction with a Spanish 101 course in college gave me the boost I was looking for in this language. Drops is a phone application that has been helpful for building up Cantonese vocabulary. Through work, I've had access to the Harvard Mentor and Pluralsight lessons. My go-to platform for e-learning overall is Lynda.com. Many libraries now pay for subscriptions to Lynda.com for their users and it carries leadership and management courses as well as technical and specialized training. The best part of Lynda.com is the ability to download courses to listen to offline on a very user-friendly app.

Short digital texts that take little time to skim are my snacks throughout the day as compared to the feasts that are the book and electronic coursework. I rarely spend more than a few minutes on these types of articles because for me it's about quantity. Pocket is a fantastic app to save articles for offline reading during wait times. I picture myself as a baleen whale who takes in lots and lots of krill but who is really looking to start a shell collection.

Deliberate Observation

Learning is only as good as being able to put it into practice and then being about to have measurable results. A main purpose of the learning is to reduce stress and reduce the impact of stress. It is also about identifying more early warning signs so I have earlier warning next time.

Exercises

Constant monitoring is important to identify trends. Mood, stress and sleep monitoring are likely the ones that have been most important to me. I've used monitoring apps before as well as physical trackers. Mostly it's about watching out for markers that are already warning signs. Once in a while, I will notice something new that makes my daily

bipolar management easier and may be that extra weight that breaks the episodes back before it can become a full blown crisis.

Ask for and Accept Help

Regardless of how smart we think we can be, this is a disorder of the brain. The most important resources are the people you talk to most—your family, your friends, the other folks who would love to be your friends.

Similar to asking for help in other circumstances, it should be your responsibility to ask for help because:

- 1. You may have really hidden it so folks don't notice*
- 2. People may have noticed that you can use help but do not want to assume you have mental illness*
- 3. People may have noticed that you can use help but do not want to assume you are ready to share with them you have mental illness*
- 4. People don't want to make a bad situation worse*

Allies

There were certain rules of engagement back when war was more commonplace and military alliances were essential to the survival of any country/group. I've found them good rules of thumb when asking for and accepting help.

- 1. Run your own country*
- 2. Own the responsibility of your on economic success*
- 3. Don't ask for handouts*
- 4. Absolutely don't expect handouts*
- 5. Don't become a deadweight on one ally—you are allowed more than one*

PART III: 17 YEARS OF BIPOLAR LEARNING

Live until old age. Learn until old age.

- *Chinese saying*

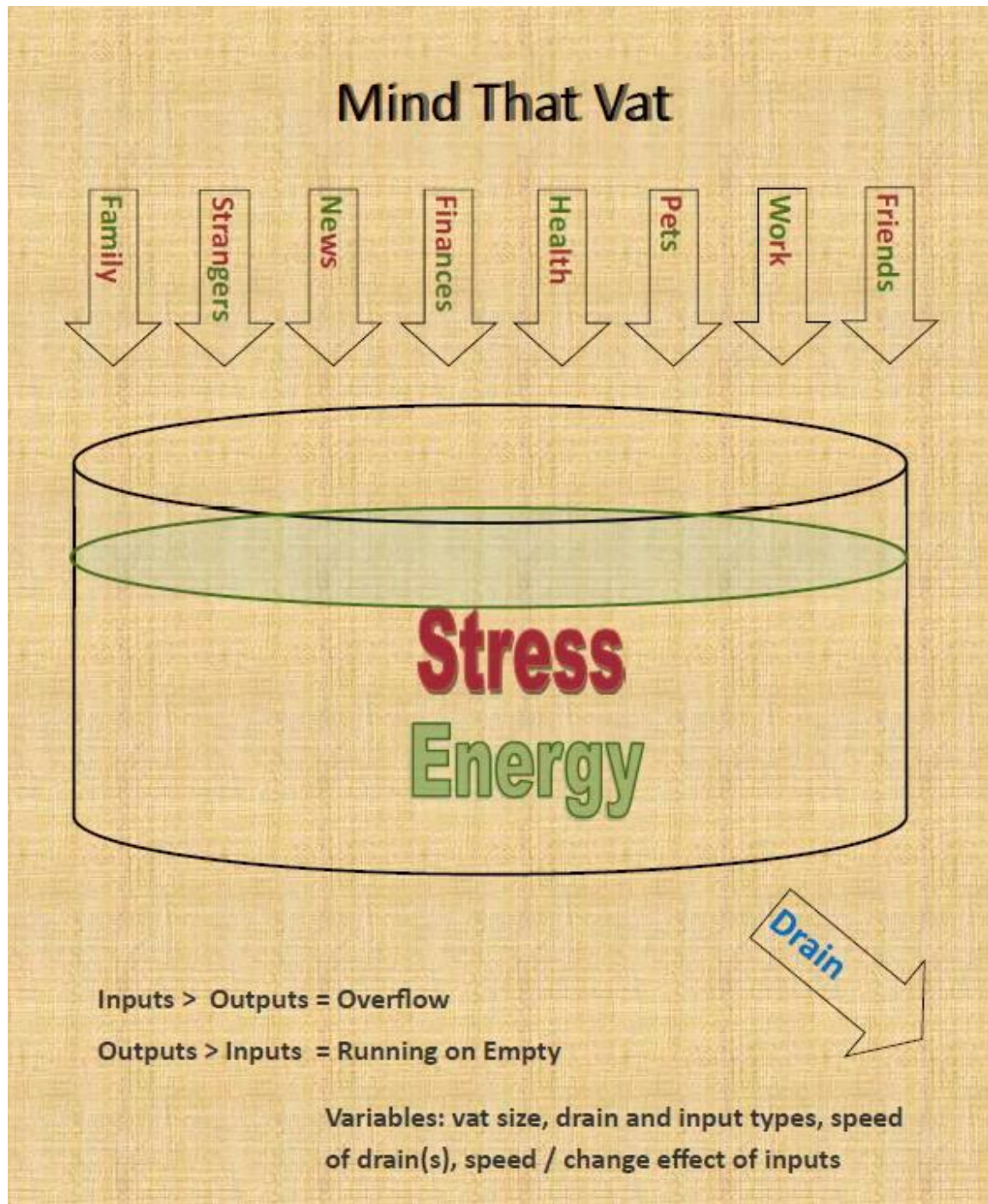
OVERVIEW

Three one-pager mind models are captured here that have helped me over the last 10 hospitalization-free years. I've also inserted my take on meditation as I have shared in 6 sessions now at my workplace. My hope is that these can help you as well.

1. *Mind that Vat*
2. *Corrective Action Plans*
3. *Happiness Kit*
4. *Meditation*

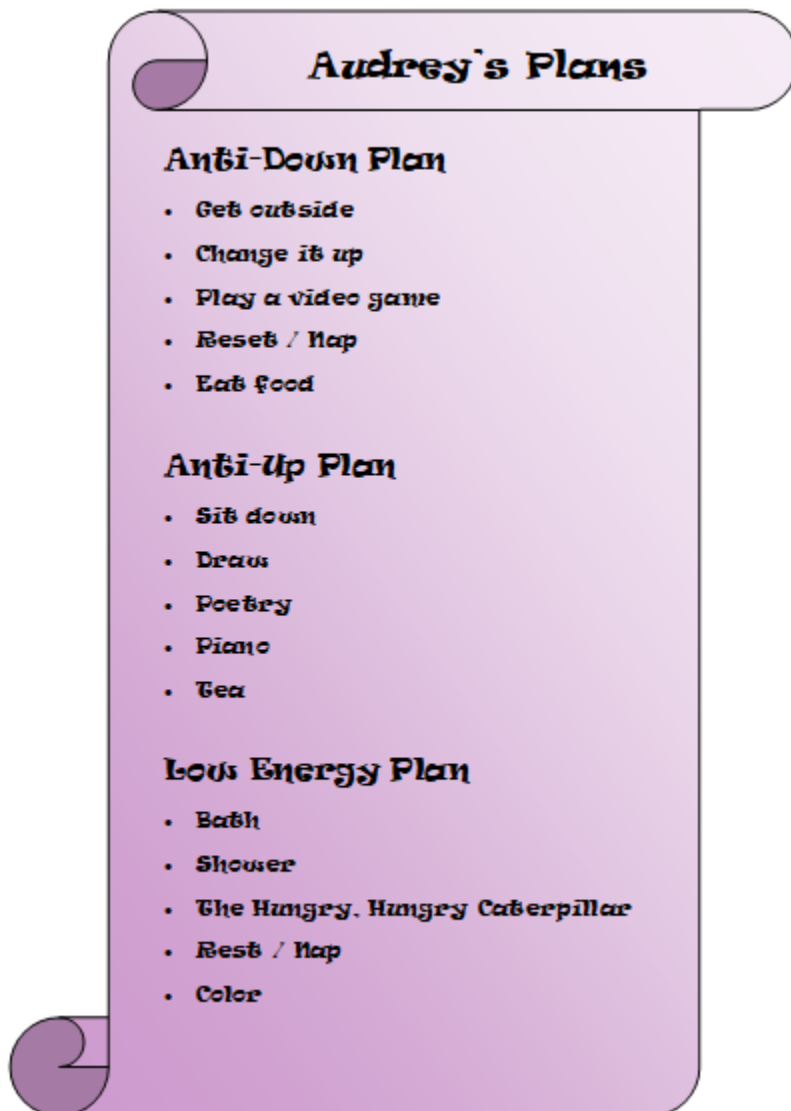
APPENDIX I: MIND THAT VAT

Finding emotional balance is a daily struggle of people with mood disorders. The idea of visualizing the inputs and outputs of stress and energy in a physics-based vat problem occurred to me during my last hospitalization.



APPENDIX II: CORRECTIVE ACTION PLANS

The best time to prepare for an emergency is not during an emergency. Creating a list of relaxing activities was one of the life skills taught during my last hospitalization. Since then, I started distinguishing between three situations needing corrective action. The lists below are not all-inclusive or mutually exclusive.



Audrey's Plans

Anti-Down Plan

- Get outside
- Change it up
- Play a video game
- Rest / Nap
- Eat food

Anti-Up Plan

- Sit down
- Draw
- Poetry
- Piano
- Tea

Low Energy Plan

- Bath
- Shower
- The Hungry, Hungry Caterpillar
- Rest / Nap
- Color

APPENDIX III: HAPPINESS KIT

My first happiness kit was put together during one craft sessions during my last hospitalization. The idea was to start with a pretty basket or box and put inside a few totems that remind you have good times and a few other items that will help you through a tougher one.

Since moving to San Antonio two and a half years ago, I created a new happiness kit for myself. The basket was from a vintage goods store. One of the childhood favorite classes was woodworking and the wooden spoon was one of the end products. Olga Kern's 2017 performance at the San Antonio Tobin Center was an unforgettable experience I had the opportunity to share with my husband. I also have in there a couple of my favorite pens, a mechanical pencil and a small sketch pad and a small notepad.

APPENDIX IV: MEDITATION

Starting in middle school and through college, I meditated over 1000 hours—usually in 1 or 2 hour increments. In 2017, I started meditating again—this time for high blood pressure / stress relief. Since then, I’ve added meditation as one of the tools I have available—this time primarily in 2-5 minute spurts. To support my workplace’s stress awareness initiative last year, I taught two Meditation 101 classes—one at each of the local multi-building sites. Since then, I’ve taught the class 3 more times.

Intended takeaways for Meditation 101 class:

1. *Meditation is a word like “dance” that was developed across multiple cultures and has no one definition.*
 - a. *No version of meditation you are trying out is “less than” or “starter” version because there is no Oxford English Dictionary authority on meditation.*
2. *Many positions and locations can work for meditation. Indoors, outdoors. In a chair, on a couch, under a tree.*
 - a. *If you want a cushion, by all means get a cushion. A repurposed durable plastic bag will do as well because it folds. Depends on your needs and wants you may have both!*
3. *Decide whether you aim to have your mind wander or not.*
 - a. *If you decide to focus on emptying your thoughts and your mind wanders, gently pull yourself back.*
4. *Music backdrop for meditation may vary widely depending on your mood in the moment.*
 - a. *Experiment with traditional Buddhist chimes, big band songs, soul music, sounds of the ocean and rainforest sounds!*
 - b. *Experiment with breathing techniques like 5 seconds in, 2 seconds hold, 7 seconds out or 4 count in, 4 count hold, 4 count out, 4 count hold.*
 - c. *Experiment with guided meditations*
5. *Meditation can be a habit like walking the dog three times a day. It can also be spur of the moment decision like going to local park.*

- a. *Decide to meditate when and how frequently you want. Change that decision as it suits you best!*

Try it out and see if it's for you! If this isn't the very useful now, keep it in your tool chest in case you want to try it again in 1 or 10 years.

AFTERWORD

My journey with bipolar began 17 years ago. The disorder was different when it first manifested and I was also a different person at 18. As I continue to grow personally and professionally, I know what has allowed me to be where I am today is Dartmouth College who supported me through three medical leaves and set me up for success in my classes over a total of almost 6 years. My parents helped me weather the weight gain, shielded me from the financial worries of 6 hospitalizations and got me to the point of stability. My husband's partnership in managing my mental illness has been crucial to going beyond surviving and into living and thriving. I came forward at work with my story a year ago in September 2018 and have had overwhelming support from the folks all around.

This is why I am writing this story. I want to add a success story to the conversation. Shoot up a star over my island to all the other islands out there quietly fighting fires hoping no one will notice and while praying the fire doesn't consume us.

Opening up to those around me at work has uncovered so many other stories. There are more of us coping than we think. There are many more success stories to hear too.