

Even the Blossom Has a Shadow

Living with the bipolar disorder

Even the Blossom Has a Shadow

Theo Broekman

For understanding
For patience
For Mathy

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1. Introductory Remarks

Do you ever feel that way too? That you want to do everything as perfectly as possible? They always tried to make me believe that I should be less perfectionistic. I am now 69 years old and have been retired for several years. And I still want to do things as perfectly as possible.

Due to a bipolar disorder, I am vulnerable. I was born with the predisposition to develop a bipolar disorder.

Perfectionism is often mentioned as a character trait that can contribute to the development of a bipolar disorder, just as a lack of self-confidence and low self-esteem can. For this reason, they often tried to 'cure' me of my perfectionism. I remember the looks of my psychiatrist and the serious conversations about my perfectionism. He spoke in a soft yet very determined voice about the dangers of perfectionism, as if it were a creeping enemy that had quietly entered my life. Every word he spoke about it seemed laden with warnings and concern. They pointed to the times when I got stuck, completely exhausted by my own pursuit of perfection. During such a therapy session, where the silence was sometimes deafening because there seemed to be a thick wall between me and my psychiatrist, he tried to convince me of the harm I was doing to myself. "Perfectionism increases your vulnerability," he said decisively.

I felt a quiet rebellion brewing inside me. I had built that wall between him and me because I did not consider perfectionism a dirty word at all. For me, perfectionism does not sound like a curse, but more like a signpost, a compass that leads me towards improvement. I did not want to believe that my urge for perfection was a defect. Perfectionism has always brightly illuminated my path in life. The thought that my vulnerability could be increased by perfectionism has always cast a dark shadow over that bright light, an ideal to strive for. Perfectionism was the anchor that kept my boat in place even in the heaviest storms. How can something so important to me at the same time harbor such vulnerability? Why should I lift that anchor?

So I didn't do that. Perfectionism has always been an important driving force in my life, in my work, in my hobbies. That is still the case. Whatever I do, I

want to do as well as possible. I don't settle for half measures. Not even, especially not, in dealing with the vulnerability caused by bipolar disorder.

Salvador Dali said: "Have no fear of perfection – you'll never reach it."

I have never been afraid of perfection. I was, however, afraid of doing something wrong. Fear of failure. I have worked on that. In the volunteer work that I still do, I am no longer afraid of making mistakes. Not because it is 'just' volunteer work, but because I know that you can only make mistakes if you do something. It's a cliché but it is true. Those who do not make mistakes do nothing at all. People who do nothing make no mistakes. I do try to learn from my mistakes. I still want to do what I do as well as possible. But I do think carefully before I take on a commitment.

In retirement, I can now reflect. To think about my life and how I could have done things differently. Could I have done it differently? Should I have done it differently? Especially: could and should I have dealt differently with my vulnerability caused by bipolar disorder? After the diagnosis of 'bipolar disorder' was made with some delay, I have always been very conscious of the question of how to deal with the vulnerability caused by bipolar disorder.

Of course, there are limitations when you are vulnerable due to bipolar disorder. Your life will never meet the so-called ideal image of a person. But tell me, is there anyone in this world who does meet that ideal image? Everyone has a limitation. Every house has its cross. One cross is undoubtedly heavier than the other, but who can make such a comparison? No one. You can't put your limitation on one side of the scale and someone else's limitation on the other side. It's not about who bears the heaviest burden. It's about how we learn to live with our own burden. Everyone has their own life, everyone has their own challenges. It's about how you deal with your challenges. That ultimately determines how heavy you experience your own limitation.

When I was diagnosed with 'manic depression', I wanted to find a way to deal with that vulnerability as well as possible. I wanted to be perfect in dealing with my vulnerability.

Initially, I dealt with my vulnerability by hiding it as far away as possible, by masking it. I buried my vulnerability deep within me, like a treasure I never wanted to find again. The pills were my mask, my weapon against the outside world. I essentially bought off the bipolar disorder by taking the prescribed medication. No one needed to know that I was taking medicine or why. I turned out to be very good at masking my vulnerability. I could do that perfectly, outside the door.

However, hiding the bipolar disorder ultimately proved not to be the right way for me to deal with it. Circumstances forced me to do things differently and to be open about my vulnerability. It took some time, but eventually, I approached this with full conviction and did it as best as I could. I even made it my mission. This book is part of my mission. I place myself under your magnifying glass.

The purpose of this book is to tell what bipolar disorder has done to me, but also, and especially, what I have done with bipolar disorder.

There is still a taboo on speaking about bipolar disorder or mental health issues in general. While almost everyone knows someone in their environment who suffers from bipolar disorder. About 1 to 2% of people in the Netherlands have bipolar disorder, affecting men and women equally.

To gain a better understanding while reading the book, it is necessary to have some knowledge of bipolar disorder. What is a bipolar disorder? Many people I talk to about bipolar disorder have a rough idea of what it is. They have heard the bells ring but do not know where the clapper hangs. So first I will try to place the clapper correctly.

Besides myself, this book inevitably also features other people. I obviously do not name most people, but those who have been part of my life for an extended period know who I am talking about. These people have not all experienced events the same way I did. I have not shared my thoughts with them to include their perspectives. That means my story is one-sided. For example, if I describe how a relationship ended, that is my view of how the relationship ended. It is not automatically our shared view. If someone feels that their role in this book is inadequately or even incorrectly portrayed, I invite them to discuss it with me.

We know Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (often simply Goethe) for his phrase "Himmelhoch jauchzend, zum Tode betrübt". In Dutch: "Heavenly joy, intense sorrow". Goethe wrote these words in 1788. They are two lines from a ten-line poem ('Freudvoll und Leidvoll'), part of his tragedy 'Egmont'. These words are often used in connection with bipolar disorder. In the words "Himmelhoch jauchzend, zum Tode betrübt" we find the echo of our inner conflict. A battle between light and dark. Hope and despair. Day and night. War and peace. Good and bad. Joy and sorrow. Sun and rain. But not according to the rhythm of nature or logic. You are overwhelmed. You feel the winter when it is summer. You grope in the dark when it is light. You feel sad when you should be happy. You have everything you desire, but you feel nothing about it.