

What is all the hype about mental health these days?

Let's get to the bottom-line front, as my military colleagues and friends would say.

- I want people in the workforce to know that they can absolutely manage mental illness and succeed (maybe even more so) with their condition.
- Raise awareness about mental health to the workforce and leadership: so much false information out there; no Bipolar Disorder doesn't mean someone's a scary person one day and a "crazy" person the other day, Borderline Personality disorder is something very different than what you probably think it is.
- Finally, I want leaders and employers to know, inappropriate things are happening at companies you would never guess or believe

This narrative might scare you, offend you, or make you think. I've never been afraid to speak my mind (and it's gotten me in trouble a few times) but, you have to do the right thing, always...and I need to share something.

This is a very personal, raw and "nothing is held back" narrative, but in my eyes, one that has to be written and shared. This is not meant to point a finger at anyone (no identifiers are shared) or to perform an act of revenge, rather, the objective/goal is to raise much needed awareness and make employers less or preferably not at all weary of people with mental health conditions. help. If one of you who read this take action, my work here is done.

Mental health illnesses, specifically bipolar disorder is the number one reason that keeps professionals out of work, both short- and long-term disability wise. (Mental Health America) That is a scary statistic, but it doesn't have to be that way. Sitting on the boards of Mental Health America, spending time with the U.S. Air Force, and working in advertising (one of the more stressful professions), I felt it was my duty to write this post as a cry for help for professionals to not dismiss symptoms that are related to mental health and to educate employers *(Yes! Those dealing with mental health challenges are just as amazing as all your other employees, they are also human, just like YOU!)*

Before I share my own story, a little bit about me first. I am an advertising executive and from what I have been told and seen on my performance reviews during my twelve-year career is that I do good work and provide tremendous amount of value to all the organizations I've had the privilege to be part of.

However, when I turned 30 years old, four years ago, I was diagnosed with Bipolar 2 Disorder and thought my career and frankly life were over. I quickly forgot about my past success, the good things, the good times, and thought to myself, "it's all over."

Not having felt any symptoms of depression my entire life, this was not only shocking and devastating, but completely foreign and terrifying. Will people think I am crazy? Will they look at me the same way? Shamefully, I thought depression was a fancy word for laziness and no motivation. Was I one of "those" people who are "depressed?"

So, at age 30 (welcome to your 30's!) my journey began. Early on, I decided I wasn't going to let this thing get in my way, so I accepted it, started my individualized treatment and maintenance plan and started practicing patience, something I didn't have much of before this. Until you or a family member,

close friend, or colleague have experienced this absolutely horrific condition, you will not fully understand, but have no fear, I will educate you a little bit about this chronic condition. Just trust me when I say this, I wouldn't wish it upon my arch nemesis.

Over the last four years, I learned to live and thrive with my condition and manage it, while still performing at an incredibly high-level despite being under immense amounts of pressure. I may even argue that my performance was at higher levels than before I was diagnosed, as I became a much more humble and empathetic human being. It's funny how that happens. When life throws you a curve, that's when we either sink or swim, become empathetic or stuck, persevere or quit.

Just because I now have to work harder, every victory becomes that much more important and appreciated. Did I make missteps along my learning journey? I sure did, and I do wish I could go back in time and address them, fix them, but unfortunately, some things must be left in the past with the hope that all will eventually be well. While I regret my mis-steps, I decided I must focus on the future and serve as a resource to those who are just starting their mental health journey in (what can be) a cruel world. Luckily, there are a multitude of ways to cope and still meet and exceed expectations.

So many employees are hired and work with so many conditions such as diabetes, chronic heart disease, and a multitude of other conditions, heck, nobody even blinks an eye and colleagues are even empathetic. Well, mental illness is no different. It is time to change our outlook and embrace diversity, truly, which includes employees with challenges, and not just physical ones but mental ones as well.

Are employers ready to hire some real talent that just so happens to have a mental illness about nearly 20 percent of the workforce already does (and you don't even know about it!)? (American Psychological Association) Yes, one out of five employees suffer some sort of mental condition. Would you look at employee with some more common health conditions or illnesses differently? It is not any more or less significant and impactful than any other condition. It should be treated as seriously and compassionately as any other illness.

For the most part, I was lucky in that over the course of the past four years I worked for some stellar employers. Unfortunately, there was one exception. While I was learning to deal with my bipolar disorder, working with my health provider, and frankly, developing a new set of coping skills, this supervisor was let's just say, more than less that supportive. In fact, he/she violated my privacy and didn't follow the law.

At the height of developing the right treatment plans and getting back on my feet--a very difficult time for anyone going through this--I had to take short term leave of disability to get some things in order. By the way, it is NOT a vacation as the supervisor mentioned above seemed to think. It is every employee's legal right when the employee cannot work because of a serious medical condition (see Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993). I quickly learned that this "vacation" didn't vibe well with my former supervisor. The fact that it bothered them sent me a signal that this situation can get very scary, very quickly.

I felt harassed and belittled by my supervisor. Pressuring me into having lunch with them, scared for my job security, I reluctantly said yes. The lunch started off with no time wasted. I was told "I bet you have depression and I haven't even worked you hard enough yet." I scrambled to answer feeling pressed into a corner with my back against the wall. I blurted out, "I have a thing...a brain thing, or something..." whatever response I could come up with after being put on the spot.

She/he responded, “well if you have a brain thing and you can’t read and write, can you do this (very demeaning) task for me?” Wow was I caught off guard. I felt marginalized for the first time in my career. But you know what, looking back on it today, I understand this person. As a hard charging only career-oriented person, it makes sense that the situation was handled this way. If it’s lack of education about mental illness or actual discrimination, they obviously missed the biggest part of being a supervisor, and that is above all to be human and kind. If he/she was joking, those were very hurtful words for someone going through a rough time to hear. Maybe he/she didn’t how to handle it better? It is for all those possible reasons why mental illness in the workforce has to be addressed.

The ultimate disappointment about that situation was that I shared my experience with someone in the Human Resources Department at my exit interview with the hopes of protecting others from the same treatment. Sadly, I learned that same supervisor was promoted not too long after this incident. That experience haunted me for years, and I needed to take action and try to do something about it.

More recently, I contacted a high-level executive to share my story. While empathetic and very knowledgeable about mental health challenges, I felt like they minimized the significance of the event and chalked up the supervisor and his/her behavior to cultural differences. I felt like I got the total canned corporate response. “Well, why didn’t you say something earlier?” Yes I did, to HR and the reason I didn’t report it to anyone else was I was afraid of losing my job. ****carefully reading your rights on FMLA and HR is very important, it is your right to disclose or not. In my particular case, I didn’t know what else to do as I was pressured, and I had to come up with something. This should not be the norm, and if it is, a call to HR is necessary. ****

Overall, the meeting with the executive was positive because it raised awareness and the chat was very empathetic, but it was also disappointing as I didn’t really get the sense that any action would take place. Personally, if I was told this, I’d be pretty horrified and want to take a step as a company (or as a human) to do my part to ensure that this does not happen to someone else again. Despite all that, this isn’t meant to say anything bad about the company (as a matter of fact, I LOVE their mission) but it is to say that even at presumably great places, bad things can and do happen, and we all have the responsibility to fix them.

I am not afraid to speak about this publicly. Corporate leaders need to be aware that things like this do indeed happen in the workplace.

Am I horrified to be doing writing about this? Yes. But, it’s the right thing to do. I believe so. My case might have been unique in nature, but I hear similar stories ALL the time.

As a matter of fact, as a true advocate, I feel as it is my responsibility to share this story with the hopes of ending the stigma about mental illness and helping others.

The more people who speak out, the more potential for understanding and clearing up misconceptions. I hope my story gives the silent sufferers hope that they too can get help and still have a wonderfully fulfilling career and life.

For those people and employers who have crossed employees with mental health conditions off their list of prospects, or don’t think they can do a stellar job, I worry not, they are not the kind of people or companies frankly anyone, should be associating with. Just like employers, us employees have a choice

too! Working in that kind of environment would not just go against my values, but frankly wouldn't be good for my mental health.

I am fortunate, however, to have come across so many wonderful, supportive, caring and helpful professionals and employers along the way. It is incredible how one little thing or act of kindness can change someone's day. To those employers and bosses, thank you. You have no idea what you've done for me, and for that, I will forever be indebted to you.

I have been asked to speak about this topic at a variety of advertising and other conferences and do so with confidence, joy and pride. I am more than happy to help employers and employees really understand this illness/subject better. It has become my passion to help others and be a resource to companies and organizations on how they can properly handle this often misunderstood and sensitive topic. I am also fortunate to know a number of other experts and advocates who are tirelessly working to help in this field. They too would be more than happy to be resources as well.

The rest of this post will be what I hope to be a helpful collection of tips that have helped me work through my challenges and can help those that are afraid to get the much-needed help they deserve.

Believe me, life with mental illness is not the end of the world. It is more manageable than you may think. You don't have to live with that kind of pain or overwhelming feelings, life is too short. As a matter of fact, the bad days give you a stern reminder how good the good days are.

About the author: Maja Stevanovich is a marketing communications executive with over a decade of experience in the entertainment industry, corporate, start-up and non-for-profit sectors. She prides herself on her relentless immigrant work ethic and her people first mentality. Maja lives in Milwaukee, WI and owns a labradoodle named Babson, named after her alma mater, Babson College.

1) If you are feeling too overwhelmed to go on, and you need help, PLEASE call the National Suicide Prevention number, 1-800-273-8255. Your life is worth EVERYTHING and we all need you, your spirit and your talents

2) If something doesn't feel right (overwhelmed by emotion, extreme sadness, sleep issues, etc.), get it checked out. Just like a physical ailment, left untreated, mental diseases can be very dangerous to your overall well-being and even physical health

3) Know who your allies are and stick with them. Be honest. Your teammates are much more likely to pick up your slack when they know you're going through a tough time than if they think you've just changed or are being lazy and unresponsive

3) This too shall pass...know that. The depression part can be so awful and deep, but it eventually goes away. Treat it like a cold, annoying and pesky, but it goes away

4) Meditate or (whatever it is that calms you and is your "you" time, find it, and then do it) and also find a good therapist you can trust and you vibe with, both of these tips are life savers

5) When you are in your depressed state, know you won't be perfect, but your 50% is better than some people's 100%, remember that. We all work all the time, nobody can say they have a super productive day every single day, if they do, chances are they are fooling themselves. Think of it as ebbs and flows in your job. There are certainly going to be more challenging times than others for everyone, as there will be amazing and stellar times, and non-eventful times. They are a reality we are all living. You will get the work done. Take your time and get comfortable being uncomfortable. Never forget, you can do it!

6) When you are in your more manic stage and have all the energy in the world, take care to get enough rest. Do all the self-care possible, and don't overwork yourself just because you feel an over abundance of energy and creativity. Work on some more difficult project with all your inspiration, but with caution.

7) When looking for a job, try to choose more a forward-thinking organization (and believe me, there are PLENTY of them) with flexible work policies that will enable you see your doctor and therapist. This is important, the supervisor I referenced earlier in this post, would scoff every time I had an appointment, to the point I had to hide it and be sneaky to leave the office.

8) Rely on the support of friends and family, it makes a world of difference!

9) As Aaron Rodgers, Green Bay Packers quarterback, famously said, R.E.L.A.X. Mental illness is highly treatable if you visit a doctor, have patience and stick to your individual care plan. Just like some other diseases, it's chronic, so the sooner you come to terms with that, the better. We've seen war and accident amputees live a more fulfilling life after limb loss than before, because they worked patiently and methodically through their condition. The same thing can be you too. You are capable of great things, sometimes shortcomings make you realize just how great and resilient you really are, a second lease on life, if you will

10) Be yourself, those who can't live with your condition are not the people you want in your life trust me Here's to the best version of YOU!

11) Don't feel sorry for yourself, you are a champion indeed

12) Don't forget you can be girl or boy boss, you just have to work a little harder, but it's so much more satisfying when you get there.

13) Those of us who suffer from mental illness truly understand the power of gratitude, positivity, and good days. Nothing can replace that magic

14) Don't be too hard on yourself. It's not your fault and you will bounce back

15) Surround yourself with good people, positive people, kind people. That would be advice I would give to anyone, but it's especially important for those who suffer from mental health challenges

****Remember to breathe and pause, nothing in the workplace is as urgent as your wellbeing and your life**.**