

# 'After 27 years with bipolar I have become an expert at putting on a mask'

*Katie 19 December 2017*

I am currently on sick leave. I had a breakdown, again. Stress + me = disaster.

The funny thing is, well it's not funny, but my colleagues didn't see it coming. I went to work, I did my job, and at 4pm got in my car and sobbed.

Welcome to my bipolar mask. After 27 years I have become an expert at it. Smile, joke, breathe and act as if my brain isn't going to explode.

## You try to become someone you are not

What is the 'mask'? It is almost like a different persona. You leave your comfort zone (home), and you become hyper vigilant about where you are. You try to become someone you are not. You try to hide your illness, so others don't think you have it. You smile, you laugh, you talk and you fight your emotions.

There are consequences though, for me. It leaves me exhausted. My head pounds, my senses, especially hearing, become over stimulated.

Loud noises, especially music, loud talking, or even small talk with my husband, become unbearable. I just want to scream, and cry. Usually, I cry, and become very irritable. I am a volcano ready to erupt!

## I very rarely have to put on a mask at home

The mental exhaustion can last a few hours, and sometimes, a few days. I very rarely have to put on a mask at home. My husband gets the brunt of the week's frustration, irritability and bickering. I find every little thing he says, a jab at me, even when it's not.

If a family function is planned on a weekend, the tension rises. I say, 'Why should I have to put the mask on? It's the weekend! This is going to exhaust me!' Then I see the disappointment in his face, and I feel guilty and angry.

## My husband will say, 'you looked like you had a good time!'

It's a vicious cycle of emotions. There I go, and I become a totally different person. My husband will say, 'you looked like you had a good time!'. My response is always to shoot angry daggers from my eyes.

I get home, and the movie in my mind starts. It plays over, and over, stressing on things I said, or may have done. I start to stress that I made a fool of myself. It is never ending.

Medication and therapies (CBT and DBT), help me a little. But after 25 years, I have learned to accept that my brain is wired differently. It's a part of me.

I have learned that it is ok to do what I need to after wearing the mask. As hard as it was to be in the situation, and dealing with the after effects I can also say:

I did it, I survived, I am a fighter.