



# Edmonton Bipolar Support Group

June 2016

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## Michelle Black

Michelle was diagnosed with Bipolar Disorder 1 in 2008 when she experienced a manic episode and was hospitalized for three weeks at the University of Alberta Hospital.

She also experienced a severe depressive episode in 2013 where she was hospitalized for three weeks at the Royal Alexandra Hospital.

There have been other times in Michelle's life when she experienced some breakdown and crisis due to certain triggers.

## Bipolar Group Member Questions - June 2016

On May 9, 2016, Michelle Black presented to our group and shared her own personal experience in being diagnosed with bipolar and how she has learned to manage her symptoms and keep living her life.

One clear message from her presentation was,

*"I have bipolar, it doesn't have me."*

As part of her presentation, Michelle agreed to answer any questions that arose for members afterwards. Below is a list of questions received from members and her corresponding responses.

Thank you kindly Michelle for spending time answering these questions,

Samantha

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## Managing Obsessive Thinking & Distractions

Hi Michelle,



Question: I find that I struggle remaining committed to my priorities and responsibilities (i.e., household chores, self-hygiene) and instead spend time chasing interests (i.e., building bird houses).

Do you have any suggestions or focusing strategies that can help curb the appeal of losing ourselves in projects as a way to self-medicate (so to speak)?

She persevered and did things for herself and because of that no hospitalizations have been required since 2013.

Michelle works diligently on staying well and she has created a personal formula that helps her to maintain balance.

She speaks about her formula and shares her experiences of living with bipolar through various community presentations.

She likes to say "I may have Bipolar, but it doesn't have me"!!!

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What are some of your best activities that you use to regulate those impulses and/or incorporate your real life responsibilities into something far less daunting than "real life responsibilities?"

Michelle: Thank you for the example, there are times when I have a lot of creative thoughts and projects going on as well and I find myself putting household chores, laundry, etc. on the back burner.

To help with this I have printed out blank Action Plans (see last page of this newsletter) and have written out all my different projects, for example:

- One for Guitar Camp,
- Bipolar Support Group,
- WRAP,
- Craft Project for Reunion, and
- Home Stuff, etc.

By doing this I have everything written down on paper and no longer in my head. I can start scheduling myself to work on these items and then when they are done I have a huge sense of accomplishment.

By having one for home stuff, depending on where I'm at (with my mental health), will depend on how detailed I want the list to be. For example, I might have:

- Get up and have a shower,
- Put in one load of laundry, etc.

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## Dealing with Prolonged Bipolar Depression



Question: If I could have one question for Michelle, it will be the following:

Has she suffered from a prolonged "bi - polar depression" that she could not find a way out of and how she has treated that? My son is in that depressed mood most of the time.



Michelle: In 2013 I suffered a severe depression where I had overdosed on my medication and had to be hospitalized for 3 weeks at the Royal Alex Hospital.

What helped me get out of the depression was:

- A change in my medication,
- Taking part in their “Think Twice” class. This class was held every day and helped teach cognitive behavior strategies in a very small step by step way.
- I attended every Wednesday a Footsteps group led by Peers that have experience with mental health challenges and I had a vision of hope that someday I wanted to do what they did.
- I attended craft classes every day and did a lot of projects like drawing, writing poems, colouring, making a rose out of clay, etc.
- There was also an exercise group where I would play badminton, practice yoga moves, play volleyball, etc.
- And I brought my guitar to the hospital and was able to sing and play again (I had stopped when I was depressed). Music was brought back to me - I even played their piano (it was very healing).
- After I got out of the hospital, I took a class called Wellness Recover Action Plan (WRAP) and I liked it so much that I went on and took training to become a WRAP Facilitator. I can proudly say that I am now facilitating the Footsteps group that I had attended during my recovery, and so I have come full circle and am now sharing with others on what works to stay well.

If your son is always in a depressed mood most of the time, I would suggest for one - that you do the best to take care of yourself so that you can be there for him.

Then if you want to learn on how to support him, you could start building a health card for depression (taken from Julie Fast Book).

The health card has three columns:

1. A list of his depression symptoms,
2. What he can do to help himself, and

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3. What you can do to help him.

I am finding that what helped me was starting to do what I love and even if I did not have the motivation to do it, I would persevere through it because I knew that I would feel much better for it.

There is hope that your son will get well and find more balance. It is a journey to wellness that we always face, because we never know what life is going to throw at us. If we can take a step back, however, and learn some strategies to cope with these triggers or warning signs, then we most certainly are on our way to finding balance and peace to handle whatever comes our way.

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## Making it Through the Really Down Periods

Question: How does she make it through the really down periods?

Michelle: After my severe depressive episode in 2013, I had taken the Wellness Recovery Action Plan and then took the training to become a WRAP facilitator. Since then I have not been hospitalized during my really down periods.

WRAP has taught me to have self-realization in noticing what triggers me and when I am showing early warning signs that I'm not well. Depending on the triggers, they may lead me to noticing when things are really breaking down or I may go into crisis mode, but I have been told that I have great insight in my illness and that I take action before it gets worse.

I also have great supporters who are on my team as well and they have really helped me when I was finding it hard to help myself. Also being part of the Edmonton Bipolar Support Group has helped as it has allowed me to find support by others who have Bipolar and continue to learn new strategies (each group is always different, depending on its members).

My latest trigger was being laid off from my job in January of 2016. I went back to another line of work, but I was heading in a downward spiral as it wasn't work that I was really passionate about. It was hard for me to do the self-care that I needed to do

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without feeling guilty that I should be working and helping them out because they were so behind.

My mother and her husband was kind enough to take me on a retreat to Maui, and while I was there for three weeks, I wasn't my happy well-self, but my mom encouraged me to go for walks with her on the beach. We also bought a journal and I started journaling – writing poems, drawing palm trees, etc. I also went swimming and concentrated on my breath – in and out, in and out. Even though I was not able to talk much, I found a way of helping myself by journaling, swimming and walking and coaching myself on my smartphone, and saying “you can do this Michelle, just get up and start your day – then go for a walk ...”

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## How Do I Register for WRAP

Question: How you go about actually registering and participating in WRAP? Do you need a referral? A certain diagnosis? Is it covered by provincial health insurance or out of pocket? ....this program was suggested to me a couple of years ago but I couldn't find any information anywhere about how to get involved .

Michelle: To sign up for WRAP® in the Edmonton area, which is offered at free of charge, you can call Michelle Knox at (780) 342-7786 or email her at michelle.knox@albertahealthservices.ca.

There is no referral process - there is no need to have a diagnosis, it is for anyone that wants to enhance their wellness - it is covered by AHS so there are no costs involved.

Samantha: Momentum Counseling in Edmonton, Alberta, is also offering a WRAP® program through their location. They can be contacted at: 780-757-0900.

Also, you can find out more about WRAP®, which was developed by Mary Ellen Copeland, PhD., by going to [www.mentalhealthrecovery.com](http://www.mentalhealthrecovery.com).

Finally, if you prefer, you can build your own personal WRAP plan by going to this link: <http://mentalhealthrecovery.com/build-your-own-wrap/>.

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## Making it Easier to Live with Bipolar

Question: What are the top 3 things that make living with bipolar easier?

Michelle: There are many, but the primary one is that I finally accepted that I have Bipolar, and I know that it doesn't have me! I know that I can manage it successfully, because I am very mindful of when I am not balanced, and I have a firm plan, based on the WRAP program for managing it. But you asked for the top three, so here they are:

1. Taking my medication every day,
2. Breathing from my diaphragm,
3. Being mindful in everything I do (which helps me to be in the present moment and allows me to enjoy things I love to do and day-to-day things that are always there to do).

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## Can you suggest any Alternative or Natural Resources?

Question: Are there any alternative resources or natural options to regulate brain static and increase motivation, but that aren't the typical go-to things like sleep better or eat better or checking B12 and iron levels?

Michelle: I have a formula that I follow of which I developed from the WRAP program and continue to add too. In that formula, the ones that I find regulate my brain static and increase motivation is:

- Going swimming - I do laps for ½ hour and then I enjoy the steam room and hot tub for 15 minutes each.
- I practice mindfulness, which helps me to stay in the present moment and not wonder off to somewhere else. For example, mindful eating, mindful walking, mindful driving, mindful swimming. To do this, I notice what I see, taste, feel, and hear, etc.

For motivation, I listen to music all day long. My day could look like upbeat music while having a shower (Toby Mac - Hold On), then having breakfast and listening to spa music or listening to an inspirational Ted Talks video. When making supper and doing the dishes I listen to Enya (usually by that time of the day, I need less stimulation so the relaxing music really helps me focus and enjoy what I am doing). Then in the evening I play the guitar and sing my favorite songs, like Eagle When She Flies, Hallelujah, Angel, Somewhere Over the Rainbow, etc.

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## Is Therapy Helpful?

Question: Is seeing a therapist helpful?

Michelle: For me, seeing a therapist is very helpful. I see my mental health therapist on an ongoing basis, even when I am well for maintenance. I also see my Occupational Therapist who I have known since I was diagnosed in 2008. Having this support puts less pressure on my family, they can support me in other ways and my husband can be my husband, not my caregiver. I feel empowered to look after my own health and I take personal responsibility for it so that my needs are met.

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## How Do You Find the Right Psychiatrist?

Question: How do you know if you have the right psychiatrist?

Michelle: When I was first diagnosed in 2008, I went to the U of A and I had a main psychiatrist but I never did see her, I saw resident psychiatrists. So, it was always someone different. When I had my severe depressive episode in 2013, I decided to switch psychiatrists so that I was always seeing the same one. I went to the Northgate Alberta Health Services Clinic and started seeing a Mental Health Therapist there. He then hooked me up with one of his colleagues who was a psychiatrist. I have been seeing them both ever since and it is going well having this support in my life.

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## Where Do I Go From This Point Forward?



Join the Edmonton Bipolar Support Group! Since this group is open to family and loved ones, ask your support people to join our group as well. To find out more about the group and to receive helpful tips and information, contact Samantha Pekh, the group facilitator, by visiting [www.psychsolutions.ca](http://www.psychsolutions.ca) or calling 780-710-9567. You can also contact Momentum Counseling at 780-757-0900 for current group dates.

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