

'My Purpose is to Save Lives'

A retired Army major general tells his story about struggles with bipolar disorder during and after his military service

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In July 2014, I was in my 36th year of military service, a two-star general, combat veteran and president of National Defense University (NDU) in Washington, D.C. At the time, I worked for the then-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Army Gen. Martin Dempsey.

After decades of success, I had become a maniac, extremely disruptive and erratic. Finally, Dempsey, a long-time mentor, boss and friend, summoned me to his office one day in July 2014.

"Gregg, I love you like a brother," Dempsey said, "but your time at NDU is done. You have until 5 p.m. today to resign or you're fired. And you need to get a mental health exam."

Unknown to me and the Army, my genetic predisposition for bipolar disorder was triggered by intense stress during my time in Iraq. During my 2003 deployment, I commanded a combat engineer brigade that comprised thousands of soldiers.

My brain responded by producing and distributing excessive amounts of dopamine and endorphins, sending me into a euphoric, high-performing mania that made me feel fearless, hyper-energized and like I was Superman. Unfortunately, this mania damaged my brain circuitry and launched me into a life dominated by unrecognized bipolar disorder.

'IT FUELED MY CAREER ASCENDANCE'

After a year of thrilling combat, with rushing adrenaline, surging bio-chemicals in my brain and a powerful, natural "high," I re-deployed to Germany, where the moon of depression eclipsed my sun of mania. Unfortunately, the under-production of these same chemicals caused a months-long depression.

I reported my depression, but because I was not suicidal and had no intention of hurting anyone, medical personnel declared me "fit for duty."

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However, I was not. After months of hard work at my job, the depression lifted naturally. The structure of Army life was key in getting me through the difficult period. This completed my first full up-and-down cycle of mania and depression, which became my life pattern.

My bipolar condition remained unrecognized by everyone from 2003 to 2014. Meanwhile, I was promoted twice and assigned to ever-tougher assignments where the norm was complexity, budget cuts and high stress.

Yet, mania helped my performance in many ways by providing ever-higher levels of energy, drive and creativity.

It fueled my career ascendance. Until it did not.

‘I FOUGHT FOR MY LIFE’

My mania went higher, and my depression sank lower until I rocketed into acute, full-blown mania in 2014.

Spinning out of control, I became disruptive, erratic and over-the-top in virtually everything I thought, did or said. Thankfully, Dempsey removed me from command. It was the absolute best decision for myself, my family and my health.

After this, I crashed into dark, crippling, hopeless depression, accompanied by terrifying delusions. My mind was filled with morbid, vivid imagery of violent death and dying, what psychiatrists called “passive suicidal ideations.” But, for me, they were anything but passive. Instead, they were real, powerful and life-consuming.

I fought for my life through the next two years. It wasn’t until a friend helped get me into the VA that I had a feeling that my condition could change. The clinical staff at VA provided me with excellent care. It was the combination of professional treatment, as well as the love and support of my wife and family, that prevented me from falling into the abyss.

After months of treatment — including numerous medications, weeks in a VA psychiatric ward, electroconvulsive therapy, and the addition of the natural element Lithium, a salt used for treating bipolar disorder — my recovery brought me to the next level and stabilized me in September 2016.

Today, my bipolar disorder is under control but not gone. To keep it at bay, I take medications, meet with my doctors and live a healthy life — mind, body and spirit.

My self-care includes exercise, a healthy diet, plenty of sleep, water, little-to-no alcohol, no illicit drugs, a network of friends, fun activities and my faith. And as much as possible, I minimize stress, anxiety and anger.

‘I DIDN’T WANT BIPOLAR, BUT IT WANTED ME’

As a former Army officer, I know that one of the keys to victory in combat is vigilance. The same holds in my battle with bipolar disorder. If I remain faithful to the task at hand, I will have the high ground and avoid an attack by the fiercest enemy I have ever faced — bipolar disorder.

More than 10 million Americans have bipolar disorder. Another 50 million have depression, post-traumatic stress, traumatic brain injuries or other mental health disorders that often lead to suicide.

Thus, it is likely that nearly every person in America is affected in some way by mental illness, either themselves, a family member, friend or colleague.

That’s the bad news. The good news is that these medical conditions are treatable. When correctly diagnosed and treated, people can live healthy, happy and successful lives.

I didn’t want bipolar, but it wanted me. It nearly destroyed everything I value. But, thanks to the help of a great many others, I have been able to transform my “gift” of bipolar into my mission: sharing my bipolar story to help stop the stigma and save lives. I share my experiences, providing knowledge and hope. My purpose is to help save lives, marriages, families, friendships and careers.

‘IT IS NOT A PERSON’S FAULT’

My vision is that everyone who has a mental health disorder gets medical help free of stigma. There is no stigma with conditions such as cancer or diabetes, so there should not be one for mental illness. Science has validated mental disorders as being physiological and not due to a lack of character or willpower. It is not a person’s fault they are ill, so we shouldn’t blame them. Instead, we must understand and accept this scientific truth.

We must learn to identify the basic symptoms of mental health disorders. Then, if you or another display them, get medical help — just as you would for a heart attack. But don’t wait — it could be a matter of life and death.

Battling mental illness has been my most brutal fight. It’s incumbent upon all of us to learn about it and help educate and encourage others.

*This article is featured in the 2022 September issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by Ret. Army Maj. Gen. Gregg Martin. Martin is based in Cocoa Beach, Florida. He is a Life member of VFW Post 10148 in Cocoa Beach and is the author of the forthcoming book *Battling Bipolar: A Two-Star General’s War with Mental Illness*.*