

Sarah's Story

As a high school freshman, I was confident in my abilities as an athlete, student, and social butterfly, but I was aching inside from the loss of my father from kidney cancer when I was nine. In January, I went to the Bahamas with my mom and her significant other. Things weren't going right. I remember feeling really confused, like I was in a dream and could not wake up. After we got home, my mom found me wandering the streets in mid-winter without a jacket and took me to the hospital, where some of my darkest moments would begin.

Key Tip: Find meaning in your life

For me, finding meaning in work and school were important because they gave me validation and allowed me to give back to those who helped me.

At age 14 I was placed in a psychiatric unit, but I thought I was older and in a nursing home. The confusion was so

great that I didn't even know my name. I eventually graduated to a partial hospital program where I met caring and compassionate nurses and activity coordinators. I got better, but it took me two months to go back to school, where I was fragile-looking and stiff. People were afraid of me and didn't know what to say. Rumors circled. I spent the summer battling a deep depression and gained weight. My psychiatrist thought I had post-traumatic stress disorder and removed me from all medications. I broke down the following year in front of my whole volleyball team. I painfully finished high school and applied to several colleges, praying that I would be accepted.

I exceeded my expectations and was accepted to three colleges. During the transition from high school to college, I also began to see a new psychiatrist who challenged me to me to self-manage my illness effectively. I continued to see this psychiatrist throughout school. I did very well until my junior year, when I lived in a sorority house with 20 women while working two jobs. Balancing work, school, and a social life became extremely stressful and led to my worst breakdown, which resulted in a three-month hospital stay. At that point, I was diagnosed with schizoaffective and bipolar disorder. Even though my hospital stay delayed my graduation by a semester, I completed my degree and interned with a Veteran's Hospital and graduated with a Masters of Social Work (and with a high grade point average).

I started working at a large mental health agency and have completed my Licensed Clinical Social Worker exam. I am now able to help those struggling with behavioral health conditions like I had struggled in high school and college. I have worked with my psychiatrist to develop a relapse prevention plan and action plan so that I continue to approach recovery with courage. I am now informed about my behavioral health conditions, advocate for myself, and do things that are meaningful. I never give up and through my dark days, I choose to live.

Sarah's Self-Management Strategies

- **Relapse Prevention Plan:** I know who to call when I am feeling down, and I know my symptoms and triggers. I also know which wellness tools work in particular situations, like when I should take a long walk or a shower to relax. Talk to your provider about a relapse prevention plan if you don't currently have one.
- **Advocate for Yourself:** It starts on your end – attending appointments on time, scheduling appointments with your provider, and asking your provider about your medication. Be an active participant in your recovery and educate yourself. A healthcare provider will not know everything about you. Write down your questions before you go to an appointment with a clinician. When I advocate for myself, I remember that because I live with this disease, I am the expert of my body and symptoms.