

## 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.