**BIPOLAR DISORDER: Top trend or a living nightmare?**

There was a time, in living memory, when admitting to a mental health problem was considered taboo, a sign of weakness, an embarrassment to be kept from the public gaze. But now, thanks to a greater awareness of these issues and the rise of the celebrity endorsed rehab-and-hasty-diagnosis by an overpaid doctor with one eye on publicity, the stigma has been all but eradicated.

In fact, in today’s world it is positively trendy to be diagnosed or to self-diagnose, in particular, Bipolar Disorder, which was once known as Manic-Depression. It seems that every week a new celebrity is revealing to the press of his/her struggles with this particular set of demons. It has even been noted by the medical establishment that more and more non-celebrities are seeking help because they believe that they have Bipolar Disorder, something which would have been unheard of only 30 years ago.

The list of high-profile sufferers is long and, in some cases, eyebrow-raising. The likes of Richard Dreyfuss, Carrie Fisher, and Stephen Fry have done much in the way of publicising their own experiences with the disease, and in so doing have raised awareness and destigmatized Bipolar Disorder. But then there are people like Robert Pattinson, Catherine Zeta-Jones, and Britney Spears, whose vague self-diagnosis or addiction problems are fronted by this term, probably by well-oiled and savvy publicity machines.

As a medically diagnosed sufferer of this condition, I have more insight than most into this illness, and am increasingly perturbed by the phenomenon of it being seen by members of the public as something desirable to have, like purchasing the same toy dog as one’s favourite singer or an exact replica of so-and-so’s handbag.

Let me be straight. It is a horrible illness with no known cure, and with it comes a whole host of medications which can exacerbate the condition, as I and probably every other sufferer have found. Don’t get me wrong, the highs can be wonderful, with heightened energy and creativity, but they can also be scary and life changing, since this high mood can lead a sufferer to embark upon risky behaviour, such as overspending, over-partying, and dangerous sexual liaisons. I, for one, lost my marriage because of the last one on that list. I have also occasionally found myself doing very odd things, such as screaming at the moon, and walking the streets in the middle of the night in my dressing gown. So, as one can see, it is certainly not a desirable thing to have, and I have only just described the mania phase of the illness.

The depression that comes with Bipolar Disorder is debilitating. It is characterised by anxiety, guilt and feelings of worthlessness, which inevitably lead to the sufferer having thoughts of suicide. In a great deal of these cases the sufferer may attempt to take their own lives, and it is in these cases that they may be hospitalized, for their own safety and to assess the right treatments and medications. I found myself in a psychiatric unit in early 2012 after a gradual descent into major depression, which followed on from a period of mania. It is inescapable, inevitable, unstoppable, but not irretrievable. Although, when you are at the bottom of this particular well you cannot see any sunlight. You cannot even conceive that sunlight actually exists.

And this is how the life of the Manic-Depressive plays out. For me at least. All Bipolar sufferers will have relapses through their lives, some may go two years between episodes, for others it can be ten years before they relapse. For me, the pattern has been set at between three and four years. This is another thing the sufferer has to come to terms with – that they can expect to have a period of intense misery at regular points for the remainder of their lives. That thought, in itself, is terribly depressing.

So, when a teen idol like Robert Pattinson comes along - the heart-throb of teens across the globe, and apparently one of the most powerful men in the world, according to the Forbes List – and proclaims with a grin of super-white teeth - ‘I don’t think I’m very romantic any more, just Manic-Depressive,’ – spare a thought for the real sufferers of this disease. The ones who lose their jobs, their families, their minds, and yes, even their lives, to this hideous condition. It may not be taboo any more, but it should never be trendy.