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I had a nervous breakdown in November 2012. I've never written about that in a public forum until now for personal reasons.

The cultural narratives surrounding bipolar disorder may not have any truth to them, but they shape us in ways we can't understand until it's too late - and worse, they shape others' reactions to us. I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder when I was six; since then, I've learned to deal with it, both with and without medication.

But along the way, I also learned some... unpleasant facts... about living with mental illness.

For instance, did you know that people with chronic mental illnesses are more likely to receive subpar medical care than their neurotypical counterparts? Did you also know that mentally-ill people are more likely to suffer complications as a result of subpar medical care? Did you know that physical illness can look like a worsening of actual mental illnesses, making it more difficult for medical professionals to determine a root cause in a mentally-ill patient until it's too late to prevent complications?

That is exactly what happened to me in 2012... in so many words.

The abdominal pain I'd suffered from since I was sixteen reached a horrible apex in 2012. Some of the attacks lasted more than 10 hours and left me exhausted beyond belief. I finally decided to go to a doctor in October after a particularly nasty attack left me bedridden for three days.

The doctor told me he couldn't find anything wrong with me and discouraged me from going to a hospital (as I was uninsured and couldn't afford the testing that I'd eventually have to get done). Eventually he settled on a "psychosomatic pain" diagnosis and directed me to a psychiatrist with Student Counseling Services. I was institutionalized for "anxiety" 8 hours later - only technically voluntary, as I had sought outpatient medication services and not institutionalization.

Here are some things I wish I'd known about the entire affair.

**The person who questions you has full control over whether or not you'll be**

**institutionalized.** They have the power to involuntarily institutionalize you via a TDO, or a Temporary Detention Order - and believe me, they will use this power if they believe you're a threat to yourself or others. The person who questioned me gave me a choice between voluntary institutionalization and a TDO, the latter of which could have resulted in a 50-day institution stay and more than \$4000 worth of medical bills. I would have had to pay those bills out of pocket (again, uninsured), and I likely would have flunked out of school despite having a 3.0 GPA.

In other words: I chose a voluntary stay because I didn't have a choice. Paradoxical? Yup.

**The Dean of Students can help you in many cases, but this comes at a price - and it'll be paid on your back.** Ever since my institutionalization, I've had to report to an Associate Dean once a month. I'm required to go to therapy in Blacksburg every two weeks, which is time consuming and expensive, because I can't afford any of the therapists in town. (Bummer.) If I don't comply, the Associate Dean will pursue disciplinary action against me, the end result of which would be suspension. This will continue until my therapist decides to release me (she won't - no therapist worth their licensure would release a PTSD patient until they're cured, and in my case this is unlikely to happen for a while) or until I graduate college... which will happen in May 2016.

You heard that right: I could be suspended for refusing to go to therapy. Ordinarily this wouldn't matter (or would be in the student's best interest), since therapy is typically helpful, but my particular cocktail of issues are difficult to treat with therapy alone, and I can no longer swallow large pills for reasons I will discuss below. My current therapist is amazing and understanding, but she's a substance abuse specialist, not a PTSD specialist.

**Oh, did I mention Blacksburg? Yeah, Blacksburg.** Radford University doesn't have a long-term counselor on the payroll as of this moment. Why? I don't know - but if you have a long-term mental illness and you don't have insurance, they will send you to New River Valley Community Services in Blacksburg, which charges you on a sliding scale.

NRVCS in Blacksburg is the one of two places in the area that charges on a sliding scale - so if you're uninsured and don't have a car, you'd better pray to God that someone you know does, because the other is in Pulaski.

And, lastly:

**If you think there's something physically wrong with you, there probably is.** I discovered I had gallstones in Fall 2013, almost a year after I'd been institutionalized for

anxiety because of severe, debilitating stomach pain. My gallbladder had to be removed. It's likely that the gallstones kept me awake (leading to insomnia, which can look like severe mental illness) and made me anxious (because really, if you were in constant, excruciating pain, you'd be anxious too).

I can no longer swallow large pills due to damage from the surgery, which renders many treatments for bipolar disorder impossible to continue. If I were to ever seek medication treatment again, it would require shots... and I'd have to find a medication that doesn't cause nausea in and of itself, which is difficult.

Don't get me wrong - I'm not trying to bash RU's mental health standards. In fact, I think RU has stringent mental health standards for a reason, and I think these standards have best intentions at heart; but I also think that Radford University's mental health standards need to involve some flexibility for the sake of students. Not every student's situation is the same, and I think that deserves to be acknowledged in some respect.