

# The Road to Hope

My bipolar life was a series of relentlessly dark detours, firecracker highs and deep black lows, and then I found my cure.

BY AUTUMN STRINGAM

**THEY SAID THERE WAS** no cure for bipolar affective disorder. True “manic depressives” like me would always be medicated to deal with the firecracker highs of mania and the deep black lows of depression. In 1993, there were stacks of pill bottles on my fridge – 13 in total – labelled with my name.

They said there was no other way, and I believed them. After all, my grandfather died of a self-inflicted prescription drug overdose, and my mother of deliberate carbon monoxide poisoning. Suicide was a tradition in my family. ▶

Thank heaven my dad didn't believe them. With God's help and his steely determination to save me, he found the answer. Who would have guessed that the answer lay in a farmer's pigpen?

Life with my bipolar mother started in rural southern Alberta. I was the second baby, born only 11 months after my sister. Over 16 years, my mom gave birth to nine kids and adopted a daughter who needed a family. That's the kind of woman she was – kind and compassionate.

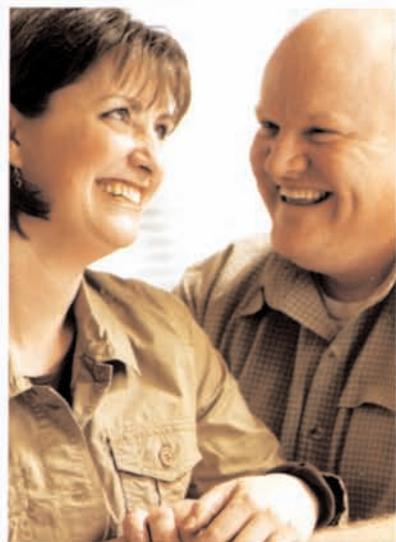
But she was still sick. Mom's symptoms, masked with excuses that her frequent pregnancies made her moody, slipped through her doctor's bipolar radar. Her father's suicide was disguised by a family too ashamed to admit mental illness; his wife, daughters and sons all called it a heart attack.

So when I got sick at the age of 13 no one in my family admitted the truth. My grades dropped and moodiness escalated. By Grade 12, I was swinging dramatically between periods of deep depression and grandiose behaviour. At 18, I was manic and married to Dana, who, at 22, was kind and unsuspecting. We had dated for only six months and just saw each other on weekends.

It didn't take long for Dana to discover that I was very sick, but he stayed by me. My symptoms worsened when I got pregnant. After James was born, I became just like my mother: repentant sobs between explosive rages and delusions. My doctor started me on a mixture of medications to control the highs and lows of my illness.

Meanwhile, my mom finally got a proper diagnosis and started medication, but she refused to talk – still silent and ashamed. In 1994, she killed herself.

I was too sedated to feel the pain, but my dad's heart was broken. Seven



With his steely determination to save me, my dad found the answer – in a pigpen.

children still lived at home. Soon my brother Joe was diagnosed with bipolar disease, too. Two generations of suicide made my prognosis clear: my doctor told me I would never be drug-free and must not have another child as long as I was medicated. All my dreams for a good life died with my mom. She was strong and still it killed her. I felt that I couldn't fight this destiny.

In September 1995, I was hospitalized for a month. New drug combinations made me drowsy, agitated and helpless. Nothing worked for more than a few weeks. I hated the side-effects of medication, but when I tried to stop taking my pills for more

than a few days my symptoms turned psychotic. In a manic rage I hit my small son, and when Dana hauled me off to the hospital, I tried to throw myself from our car onto the freeway.

Then my dad met David Hardy, a biology teacher turned pig-feed formulator. David listened to my dad's tale of the illness that gripped Grandpa, Mom, me and now my brother, and said, "That behaviour sounds like a pig with ear-and-tail-biting syndrome." David described a nutritional supplement that seemed to work on pigs, whose digestive systems are similar to humans. Then at his wit's end with my brother's worsening

## EMPowerplus: Under Study

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condition, my dad felt he had nothing to lose by trying such an approach. David and my dad created a supplement for my brother that closely mirrored the pig variety – it contained specific ratios of calcium, chromium, selenium, copper, phosphorus, vitamins A, D and E, and relatively rare essential trace minerals such as nickel and boron. The results were amazing: Joe's moods settled and he became rational again.

When I came out of the hospital after another suicidal fit, Dad took me in to help Dana keep me safe. Two days later, in spite of heavy medication, I escalated into a tantrum, rummaging the kitchen for knives. Dad took charge and forced me to take David's supplement three times a day while reducing my prescription medications. (At the time, the regimen included several pills and a bitter liquid mineral, but the 36 ingredients have been consolidated into capsules, 15 of which I take every day.) Within a week, my symptoms of panic, rage, even the psychotic gaping hole in my chest where music and voices would haunt me disappeared.

Why does this supplement work? Nobody is entirely sure, but Dad thinks it's because the supplement supplies my body with the necessary ingredients to produce and synthesize neuropeptides and neurotransmitters – the nuts and ►

Controlled trials of the supplement EMPowerplus are only just beginning, but preliminary findings are already suggesting that “further research is justified,” according to Dr. Charles Popper, a psychiatrist at Harvard Medical School and McLean Hospital in Belmont, Mass.

Popper, a specialist in psychopharmacology and the treatment of bipolar disorder, has studied various medication therapies for psychiatric disorders. Several years ago he started using EMPowerplus in some patients in his clinical practice.

About 30,000 people worldwide have used the supplement as a treatment for mood disorders, according to Truehope Nutritional Support Ltd., the nonprofit company established to provide support for users of the EMPowerplus supplement. “Thousands claim mental health and stability using our supplement,” says David Hardy, cofounder of Truehope in Raymond, Alta.

The supplement has supporters in the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA). “In my capacity in the CMHA I witnessed dozens of people, who after years of frustration with conventional treatment methods, experience phenomenal results with EMPowerplus,” says Ron LaJeunesse, retired executive director of the Alberta division of CMHA. Does it work for everyone? No, says LaJeunesse, but no psychiatric drug does. However, for those in whom the supplement works, “why would anyone want to deny them that?” he asks.

At the same time, many patients are well treated with conventional treatments. Numerous studies have helped determine the efficacy of the various treatments that have been standard therapies and have documented and studied their side-effects. “A patient should think very carefully before considering a novel alternative treatment in place of an established treatment,” says Popper. “Controlled scientific studies are needed before the safety of a new treatment is known.” He stresses that the decision about which treatment is appropriate for a particular individual should be made in careful consultation with a physician.

Hardy agrees that there are limitations to the supplement. “We recognize this [supplement] doesn't work for everyone, and that's why we are grateful to independent researchers who are discovering why and how this works.”

Like all mental illnesses, bipolar disorder is difficult to treat successfully. More than one in three patients admitted to hospital for mental illness will be rehospitalized within the same year, according to the Canadian Institute for Health Information. Also, up to 25 per cent of all suicides by patients with severe mood disorders can be attributed to bipolar disorder and major depression.

bolts of a healthy brain chemistry. Psychiatric drugs might mimic these chemicals, but not always in the correct amounts.

Dana took me home, and I started my journey to complete health. In two months, I was medication-free and stable for the first time in years. However, there were habits of my illness I needed to break, such as hiding in closets when I was stressed, ignoring my son and lashing out in public. *Counselling helped me learn coping, communication and parenting skills.* I read books, took classes in life skills and gave away signs of my mania; a thousand dollars' worth of yarn purchased on a manic shopping spree went to women who knit for sick babies, and a dining-room set I repainted in the middle of an all-night mania went to a needy family.

Finally, I started writing my story. In the pages of my life, all of the physical and emotional clutter of my illness scattered like ashes.

It has been over 11 years since my dad and David discovered the supplement now called EMPowerplus. David found an American company to help produce the all-in-one supplement so that researchers could develop a placebo-controlled study. Word of mouth brought thousands of people looking for help, and so began the participant support program under a company called Truehope Nutritional Support Ltd. As research was published there has been virulent opposition to the nondrug therapy. What started out as a hopeful attempt to save his family has turned into a fight of a lifetime for my dad (see "EMPowerplus Under Study," page 84).

Amid politics and publishing, my normal life has gone on. Dana and I are still happily married. James is now 14 and a big brother to Samantha, Melanie and Meagan. There's a good chance that my children have inherited the tendency toward mood disorder and, without supplementation, will acquire the illness that killed my mother and grandfather and kept me captive for so long. I encourage all my children to take the supplement regularly.

I have dedicated my newfound life to helping others. Several people have joined in the cause to form Shinah House, an organization that educates and supports healing transitional housing for those recovering from mental illness. My book, *A Promise of Hope* (HarperCollins), will be available in bookstores this fall. All my profits will go to support Shinah House.



## Editor's Note

A controversy surrounding the EMPowerplus supplement has continued for more than five years.

Supporters say the supplement works miracles on some people with mood disorders. Indeed, a small study of 11 patients found that the 36-ingredient mixture of vitamins, minerals, amino acids and antioxidants had a 55 to 66 per cent improvement on the patients' health within six months.

Health Canada and many in the medical community, on the other hand, have criticized Truehope for unproven claims of a miracle cure. They have expressed concern that patients will stop taking their approved medications, a situation that could pose real health risks. They are also worried that the supplement contains amounts of nutrients that may exceed the maximum limits permitted for nonprescription use.

It's against the law to make claims about the therapeutic effect of a drug unless it has been proven safe and effective in controlled scientific trials. Natural

health products used to be grouped in with drugs, but in 2004, new Canadian regulations appeared to open the door for supplements such as EMPowerplus to be sold in Canada as natural health products. However, despite these reformed regulations, staff at Truehope were charged with the illegal sale of a drug. According to Truehope staff, all but one of the charges were dropped and in that one case, Truehope was exonerated of wrongdoing. Alastair Sinclair, a spokesperson for Health Canada, says that Health Canada has decided not to appeal the court case.

The bottom line is that this supplement may pose problems for some people, but for those who have failed with more traditional approaches, it might just provide some relief from debilitating symptoms.

All medications should be taken with caution and with the knowledge of a supervising physician.

— *Pauline Anderson, Editor, Family Health Canadian Living Magazine*

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