

# INTRODUCTION

Beginning in the fall of 1988, Jim was voluntarily hospitalized in two psychiatric facilities. Finally, after nearly six months, he was discharged with a diagnosis of bipolar disorder.

Jim's bipolar diagnosis changed a lot of things for us, and since then we've learned many things about ourselves and our relationship. His hospitalization and diagnosis presented us with two major challenges: first, it forced us to deal with some longstanding issues in our relationship, and second, the complications of his mental disorder introduced us to a whole new way to live.

*Mental Illness and Your Marriage* is an expanded version of a keynote address we gave at the 2002 NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Illness) California Conference. Our presentation was ruthlessly honest, yet infused with hope and practical help.

The positive responses from spouses living with mentally ill partners was overwhelming. But the thing that surprised both the conference leaders and us was the enthusiastic response from couples who *weren't* struggling with the effects of mental illness. So, whether your marriage involves mental "problems" or just faces "normal" marital struggles, we hope you will find this book helpful.

Saving and rehabilitating our marriage has been a long, painful process, but it's been well worth the time, effort,

money, and emotional turmoil. We've learned, and are still learning, valuable lessons in healing and enhancing our relationship. While we earnestly desire to be a blessing to each other, we also want to be a blessing to other couples.

The purpose of *Mental Illness and Your Marriage* is to share our experiences, offering practical tips and strategies for you to implement in your marriage. We share our knowledge with the hope that other marriages might be healed, strengthened, and spared the pain of divorce.

Our approach is similar to D. T. Niles's description of evangelism: "One beggar sharing with another beggar where to find bread."

As in our original NAMI keynote talk, the chapters ahead are arranged as an interview. We will begin by providing some information about mental illness and marriage, and will then share our personal stories. Next, both of us will answer the same three questions from our own perspectives:

1. How has bipolar disorder affected your marriage?
2. How have you coped with the effects of bipolar disorder?
3. What have you done to heal your marriage?

We then share some actionable ways to jumpstart your marriage healing process, and conclude with a chapter about what to do if a spouse is unwilling to get help for his or her mental illness.

As you read our words, please apply a slogan from Alcoholics Anonymous: "Take what works and leave the rest."

# 1

## WHY TALK ABOUT MENTAL ILLNESS AND MARRIAGE?

*Marriage is like life in this—that it is a  
field of battle, not a bed of roses.*

ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON

While divorce statistics vary somewhat from study to study and year to year their numbers aren't too far apart. In the US and Canada, at least 40 percent of *all* marriages fail.<sup>1</sup> Divorce statistics for marriages where one person has bipolar disorder are worse—it is estimated that *90 percent* end in divorce!<sup>2</sup>

The “Bible” for mental health providers is the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, commonly known as *DSM-5™*. It lists more than 300 mental disorders. Some of the more common ones are: clinical depression, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, dementia, and anxiety. Each of these disorders bring changes in thinking, mood, personality, personal habits, or social withdrawal.

Symptoms of a mental illness may include mild to severe disturbances in thoughts or behaviors (or both) which result in an inability to cope with life's ordinary demands and routines.

Even though every disorder has a unique set of symptoms, characteristics, and specialized treatments, mental disorders generally have many traits in common and can lead to similar marital problems.

In the case of bipolar disorder, multiple studies show that without effective treatment (at minimum, medication and counseling) it is rare for a bipolar person to become healthy or stay healthy. In fact, without treatment, bipolar disorder (as with many other mental illnesses) almost always *worsens*.

For untreated bipolar sufferers in *depressive* periods, there can be an increase in harmful depressive symptoms such as:

- irritability;
- emotional numbness;
- sleep difficulties;
- anxiety;
- problems with physical health;
- overwhelming emotional pain;
- procrastination;
- withdrawal from people;
- avoidance of phone calls;
- lack of motivation;
- inability to concentrate;
- poor memory;

- inability to experience pleasure;
- sense of failure;
- extreme guilt;
- self-condemnation;
- disorganization;
- risk-taking;
- obsessive thoughts;
- paranoia;
- hopelessness;
- pessimism about the future;
- inability to function; or
- suicidal thinking.

For bipolars without professional treatment, *manic* periods will become more severe, leading to an *increase* in damaging manic symptoms. They might be described as:

- extremely energetic;
- over-committed;
- the life of the party;
- having racing, obsessive thoughts;
- talking excessively loud and rapidly;
- experiencing temper explosions;
- needing little sleep;
- overly optimistic;
- extremely self-confident;
- all-knowing;
- argumentative;
- aggressive and controlling;
- verbally and/or physically abusive;

- addicted to things like alcohol, drugs, gambling, spending, sex, or food;
- financially irresponsible; or
- likely to take extreme risks.

A non-treated bipolar spouse wreaks emotional havoc in the marriage and with the children. Think about these distressing situations:

- A bipolar husband left his wife and was living with another woman, but he still wanted to come “home” to eat, sleep, and be with the kids.
- A bipolar wife was so strung out on drugs and alcohol that she couldn’t be safely trusted to drive the kids to and from school and other activities.
- A bipolar husband kept gambling away the family’s savings until they were in danger of losing their home.

But there is hope! *Mental Illness and Your Marriage* specifically addresses how bipolar disorder affects a marriage, and how a marriage can be rescued from manic and depressive mood swings.

While this book focuses on marriage repair and enrichment with a bipolar spouse, these same marriage recovery principles will work for marriages affected by most other mental disorders. They will even work for most marriages *not* impacted by mental illness.

Can you relate to the following comments from two frustrated spouses who are ready to give up on their marriages?

**A teary wife grimaces,** “My husband’s mental illness wasn’t the sole *cause* of our marital problems. He and I had strains on our relationship long before his bipolar diagnosis. We probably had more friction in our marriage than most of our friends, yet we loved each other and somehow managed to endure our differences.

But ever since he had his breakdown, our relationship’s been fragile at best. He’s thin skinned, easily agitated, and quickly hurt by me and others. Our kids and I constantly have to walk on eggshells around him, always afraid we’ll say or do something that will trigger an upset. Can he change? Can our marriage be fixed, or should I drop all my expectations and file for divorce?”

**An angry husband laments,** “My wife’s mental disorder has really changed her—and our relationship. Gone is her gentle, sensitive, caring, engaging side. For several years now, she’s alternated between totally isolating from everyone, and exploding at them in angry outbursts. I’ve tried everything I know to fix things between us. At times she’s just impossible to live with. Is there any chance she’ll come around and be her old self again? Or should I face the hard facts and call it quits on our marriage?”

Can you identify with some of these frustrations? If so, this book will give you hope and workable tools to manage your tough reality and rehabilitate your marriage.