

BIPOLAR **NO MORE MASKS**



COMING OUT ABOUT MENTAL ILLNESS
IN THE POST-SOVIET WORLD

MARIA FAVORSKY

Maria Favorsky

Bipolar No More Masks

Coming out about mental illness in the
post-Soviet world

2022

Fonts by «ParaType»

Book cover: Bojemoi

Illustrator: Nastya Klymenko

Translator: Anastasia Egorova

Literary editor: LM Penner

Proofreading: Soussanna Passoff

Literary Adviser: Rod Baker

Photo by: Dmitry Vorobyev

Photo by: Vladimir Plusov

Photo by: Elena Belentieva

Photo by: unsplash.com

© Maria Favorsky, 2022

Created with Ridero smart publishing system

Contents

Introduction	7
Book review	12
“The psychiatric help system in Belarus is still a Soviet system”, — Pavel Lotvin, coordinator of Clubhouse	
“Open Soul”	14
“I’ve started my life from scratch ten times”, — Stas Tolstokorov, entrepreneur and head of the public organization “BARvinOK” in Kyiv	27
“It seemed to me that I was a Jesus Christ Superstar”, — Sasha Skochilenko, artist and musician	43
“Manic, I was shameless and fearless”, — Elena Rydkina, sex-educator	61
“To become a businessman in Russia, you have to be insane”, — Alexander Donskoy, showman and entrepreneur	78
“I can give the impression of a very functional person, but that’s an illusion”, — Sasha Starost, modern artist	93
“I am a weirdo, but that’s what I am,” — Nikolai Kurbatov, director of editing and poet	109
“Darkness always fades”, — Alisa Chernikova, book editor .	119

OUR TEAM

Book cover: Bojemoi

Bojemoi art group unites two young collage artists from Moscow and Kyiv.

<https://www.behance.net/bojemoi>

Illustrator: Nastya Klymenko

Nastya is a bright artist from Kyiv specializing in body art. She made collages with portraits of the heroes of this book.

She has lived with bipolar disorder since her teenage years and currently acts as an ambassador of the Mental Health Ukraine charity.

<https://www.behance.net/tasteofbeauty>

Translator: Anastasia Egorova

Anastasia translated most of the texts in this book from Russian to English.

She studies psychology in Moscow and translates academic literature in this field. Also she lives with a depressive disorder and supports her mother who has bipolar disorder.

Literary editor: LM Penner

Pen reviewed the interviews herein. Pen is originally from Canada, though has spent the last 12 years between Spain, Russia and Mexico, where they currently reside, working as an editor and writer.

Literary Adviser: Rod Baker

Rod is a psychological counsellor, businessman and writer based in Vancouver. Recently he published an inspiring book about his experience of managing a mental health non-profit.

<https://rodbakerbooks.com>

Proofreading: Soussanna Passoff

Soussanna is a psychologist and Montessori directress in Moscow, who also has bipolar disorder.

Photo by

Dmitry Vorobyev

Vladimir Plusov

Elena Belentieva

unsplash.com

***Dedicated to peace, not war
To empathy, not hate
To creativity, not destruction***

Introduction

In the end, it took me over five years to complete this book. It was in 2015 that I myself was diagnosed with bipolar disorder and I was absolutely desperate to understand what was happening to me and have an idea of what to expect. Just six years ago this topic was not discussed in public within Russia due to the severe stigma surrounding mental illness. There were no adequate publications about bipolar disorder in the mass media, no books (except for a couple of manuals for medical students), and almost no personal accounts of mental illness available.

So I started to compile this information myself, researching scientific publications, books and websites in English. I also started interviewing other people living with mood disorders. As a journalist, I decided to share this information with as many people as possible through publications in traditional and social media. In that way I created a patient community and online support group called Bipolarniki (translates as bipolar people)¹.

I decided to translate to Russian Kay Jamison's bestseller "Unquiet Mind" about the scientist's struggle with bipolar disorder, which had inspired me immensely. It took me a year to find a publishing house interested in the project².

After that, I started thinking of creating a book which would recount the personal experiences of people living in my

¹ <https://www.facebook.com/groups/bipolarniki>

² <https://alpinabook.ru/catalog/book-bespokoyyny-um/>

country. At that time in 2016, not even one of my 12 respondents dared to reveal their names, so I published their stories anonymously¹. Unexpectedly, that self-published book became a bestseller in Russia with over 10,000 readers. Possibly, due to it being the first of its kind in my country.

That experience changed my life's course. I completed a Master's degree in Psychology and changed my career from journalism to a mental health non-profit trajectory.

During those years many things changed in my country. Public discussion about mental health and illness was sparked, thanks to self-advocacy activists (including several heroes of this book and myself), the development of social media providing a platform for them, as well as a few progressive on-line media outlets and several Russian celebrities who bravely decided to be open about their diagnosis.

Now in 2022 I have finally fulfilled my plan. I'm delighted to present a book of personal stories of people with bipolar spectrum disorders who decided not to mask themselves anymore.

I'm convinced that if more people start talking openly about their mental health challenges, the stigma of psychiatric illness will gradually disappear.

This is a book of deeply personal stories of people living with bipolar spectrum disorders in Post-Soviet countries. Eight men and women made the bold decision to open up and be sincere about their illness and struggle for acceptance in a society full of stigma and oppression.

All of those interviewed have succeeded in becoming influential in their fields, which include psychoeducation, sex education, civil rights, entertainment business and arts. They tell their often non-linear stories of illness and recovery, of the ways they've found to accept themselves and to change

¹ <https://ridero.ru/books/bipolyarniki>

society. I draw a portrait of not only these people, but also of modern Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine, their systems of mental health care and civil society.

A young teacher from Belarus who is not allowed to work at school because of his diagnosis, but who's excelled at managing a clubhouse for people with mental disorders;

A Ukrainian non-profit manager and Euromaidan activist who started his life anew after each of his 10 involuntary hospitalizations;

An artist from Saint Petersburg who created a comic about her depression that went viral;

A dominatrix, whose mania helped her promote the ideals of sexual revolution in Russia;

A businessman who attempted to run for the Russian presidency, but ended up in prison;

A modern performer who flagellated herself on stage to show what stigma feels like;

A young techie who lives on disability benefits, but refuses to take money for his movie trailers, of which he's created about 1,000;

A literary editor, who contributed to 200 books about the brain and psychology.

They may have the same diagnosis, but represent in their irrepressible existence unique and various talents, ambitions as well as challenges, and each, I believe, has made some input into making our difficult world a better place.

Who is insane?

Russia-Ukraine military operation update

When I was finalizing this book, the Russian military operation¹ in Ukraine erupted and brought unprecedented chaos into the lives of both Ukrainians and Russians. Almost half of the team that worked on my book are from Ukraine: two of the interviewees and both illustrators, and this is not accidental. I wanted to show that people with mental diagnoses in our countries face similar challenges, such as social stigma and the contradictory heritage of Soviet psychiatry. That it's beneficial for us to unite our efforts in solving these problems.

This conflict throws us all back: it damages cooperation, civil society, the nonprofit sector, healthcare and medicine as well as many other areas. It is breaking families, lives and the mental health of millions of people.

Watching the current news, I can't stop questioning: Who is really insane? The men and women with mental diagnoses who create social movements, write books and set up performances? Or the politicians, who in just a few days managed to destroy what had been built over many years?

I have added several updates from March 2022 to show how my interviewees from both Ukraine and Russia have been affected by this military operation.

Here's a testimony from Nastya Klymenko, artist and ambassador of the Mental Health Ukraine charity, who made illustrations for this book:

¹ I use the words "military operation", because in March 2022 Russia adopted a law imposing a jail term for spreading any information "discrediting its armed forces". For example, for calling this conflict a war instead of "special operation". <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-introduce-jail-terms-spreading-fake-information-about-army-2022-03-04/>²

² https://ridero.ru/link/Dc16_Rdv3_UJ-S

“On February 24th we woke up with my husband in our apartment in Kyiv to the noise of explosions. We grabbed our two cats and a backpack and rushed by car to our cottage in the suburbs. But the bombing was still heard there close, so we decided to drive father, to our relatives in a rural area.

I did not have time to collect enough pills so I had to reduce the dosage I was taking. I am relatively safe now and busy with manual labor in a village. But I live in constant fear for our future, for our friends and other people. I pray for this nightmare to end so we can return to Kyiv. I don't want to leave my country.”

How to help

If you wish to support Ukrainians in this disaster, you can make a donation to one of the charity organizations, helping people to overcome it.

For example, Red Cross Ukraine

<https://www.icrc.org/en/where-we-work/europe-central-asia/ukraine>

<https://www.facebook.com/RedCrossUkraine/>

Maria Favorsky, journalist and psychologist

Book review

Almost 20 years ago when I was a medical student, I heard my European colleagues widely discussing the importance of fighting the stigma surrounding mental illness. Their words seemed absolutely relevant and human, yet totally alien to Russian practice. At that time, in all honesty, I shared the prejudices and skepticism of many of my professors and older colleagues. I truly believed that a chronic mental disease was a kind of disability.

I held those stereotypes as firm beliefs until I started communicating with patients. First in Europe, then in my daily practice, and finally at international conferences.

I learned that some of my brilliant colleagues, psychiatrists and psychotherapists, live with bipolar disorder and make enormous efforts to improve mental health services in my country.

I watched my colleagues and patients with diagnoses start families, build careers, and make the world better. They have ups and downs, and sometimes they have episodes, but they get good quality medical help and personal support and go on with their lives. I was amazed to see people living with bipolar disorders passing job interviews for senior positions amid acute episodes and hospitalizations.

The more people I met, the better I understood that diagnoses don't define people. I would compare it with a sack with heavy stones on your back. You have to carry it most of your life, but still you're bigger and more important than your load. There's a great and diverse life beyond the illness, and everyone has a chance to live it according to their values and passions.

One day on the London tube I saw a newspaper with a portrait of Prince Harry on the cover. The Prince spoke openly

about his mental health challenges and treatment after his mother's death.

I hope one day we'll see the same papers in the Moscow metro, with our politicians discussing their suffering sincerely, searching for help, treatment and experience in coping.

This book gives hope and a sense of relief, as it opposes the stigma surrounding mental health unabashedly. I feel grateful to its heroes, because I know how much strength it takes to be open in your vulnerability and to maintain faith in the good in people.

Amina Nazaralieva, psychotherapist, co-founder of Mental Health Center Clinic in Moscow

“The psychiatric help system in Belarus is still a Soviet system”, – Pavel Lotvin, coordinator of Clubhouse “Open Soul”

“My colleagues at school came to know that I was in a mental institution and the news spread. The only reason I wasn’t dismissed immediately was because of a staff shortage in that particular rural area. Over the next months, I lost most of my friends, as well as the trust of my colleagues. I became the target of offensive and hateful remarks. Some parents of my students wouldn’t allow their kids to go on field trips with me, because I ‘was crazy and dangerous’.

There was a bizarre incident at a church holiday service. A priest announced before a crowd of locals that I was possessed by demons and everybody was told that they needed to pray for me. After that, people literally pointed fingers at me, and elderly women crossed themselves when they passed me on the street. I couldn’t handle the pressure and decided to stop taking my meds and pretend to be normal.”



Twenty-seven-year-old Pavel Lotvin is a history teacher who is not allowed to work in schools because of his diagnosis of bipolar disorder. Pavel leads a clubhouse called Open Soul in Minsk, a non-profit organization that helps people with mental illness to find their place in society.

I held this interview in August 2020, during the time when massive public protests had erupted in Minsk against the results of presidential elections, widely considered to be unfair. During that time, Pavel had been coordinating psychological help for the numerous victims of widespread police violence.

Pavel told me about the psychological consequences of this violence, the repressive side of the psychiatric care system in Belarus, as well as about his personal experience of severe stigma and self-advocacy.

August 2020

These days, I work triple shifts. I wake up early and check my social media. I receive numerous requests for help from victims of police violence. There are also offers of help from volunteers — psychologists and psychotherapists. My job is to help them find each other.

Then I go to our Clubhouse and organize its daily routine. With specialists and volunteers we organize support groups and psychotherapy groups, as well as practical skill training such as cooking and computer classes for our members. We also offer some cultural entertainment. We help ex-patients to reintegrate into society after months spent in a mental hospital because the official healthcare system doesn't provide any support for their social rehabilitation.

Clubhouse International¹ is a worldwide movement that offers people living with severe mental illness opportunities for friendship, employment, housing, education and access to medical and psychiatric services in a single environment.

The Clubhouse in Minsk² is one of only two institutions in Belarus facilitating social rehabilitation for psychiatric patients. Currently, it has a small rented apartment as a meeting space, over 200 regular members and four employees. Three of them, like Pavel, have mental health challenges. It is a non-profit organization funded by private donations.

In the evening, my third shift starts on Okrestina street near the infamous Trespasser isolation center.

Mass protests in Belarus against the unfair presidential elections erupted in August 2020 and lasted for over half a year. Alexander Lukashenko, often called “the last European dictator”, has ruled the

¹ Clubhouse International: <https://clubhouse-intl.org/>

² The Clubhouse in Minsk: <https://byopensoul.wordpress.com/english/>, <https://imenamag.by/projects/clubhouse>

country for 26 years. In August 2020, he announced that he had earned 80% of the votes. In contrast, according to some independent calculations, the winner was opposition leader Svetlana Tikhanovskaya.

Hundreds of thousands of people poured onto the streets of Minsk and other cities to protest, and thousands were brutally detained. Okrestina street became the epicenter of the protest in the capital city of Minsk because of the biggest detention center being located there.

Lukashenko succeeded in suppressing the movement using extremely violent measures¹: mass imprisonments, forced discharges and criminal prosecution, in addition to beating and torturing some of the leaders of the protest. About 100 of the detained activists are still missing and believed to be dead. Tikhanovskaya had to leave the country, fearing for her life.

For weeks there was a tent camp at that location, inhabited by hundreds of people. The family members of the detainees and volunteers are there, providing various kinds of help, from mobile phones to administering medical aid. I often stay there until late at night, mostly talking to people, looking for those in need of psychological help. Sometimes, I just listen to their stories and offer empathy and understanding. Others I send to crisis psychologists or psychiatrists. The most common complaint is the fear of the unknown, stress and anxiety. Many people have no idea what's happened to their loved ones after they were arrested; they don't know what to expect.

This fear often reaches the extent of paranoia, because here in Minsk (like in many other places in Belarus now), you can never feel safe. During the first weeks of the protests, the militia mostly attacked young men and women in the city center, where the major protests took place. But now they search

¹ Mass protests in Belarus and police violence
<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/belarus-elections-torture-human-rights-b1638750.html>

for “enemies” everywhere, even in the suburbs. People lock themselves up in their apartments, afraid even to duck out to the corner store, because the riot militia could just grab them in the street. On a number of occasions, police officers were seen shooting rubber bullets at people on balconies. Whether you have taken part in a protest or not — if you look suspicious to them, they might attack or grab you.

I fear the worst is still to come. Many people are in a state of shock and don’t realize that they need help. But they are traumatized psychologically, and this trauma won’t just disappear. I expect there will be mass cases of post-traumatic stress disorder in the coming months.

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a form of stress disorder typical for people who have survived violence and traumatic events such as war or serious injury. These people experience symptoms like vivid flashbacks, intrusive thoughts and nightmares, among other symptoms.

I’m proud that the psychological community has responded to this crisis with so much compassion. Psychologists and psychotherapists self-organized on social media to provide voluntary aid to the victims of state violence. The biggest Facebook community on this topic includes almost 2,500 specialists.

However, there are still not enough counselors to cover some areas, for example, to help kids and teenagers who have experienced their family members being beaten and taken away in front of them.

Update from August 2021

A year after my interview with Pavel, I heard troubling news: In July 2021, the Investigation Committee of Belarus froze the bank accounts of the charity crowdfunding platform “Imena” that had been funding the Open Soul Clubhouse activities, as well as 39 more social projects in Belarus.

During the previous five years, this platform collected about USD 3 million from private donations to support disabled people, homeless people, orphaned children and victims of violence.

It is a part of a wider crackdown on civil society and many independent organizations in Belarus, which the government calls a “mopping-up operation”¹.

The team of the Clubhouse in Minsk started collecting direct donations and managed to continue their work.

Soviet-style psychiatry

Mental health issues are still not discussed in public in Belarus, everything related to psychiatry is heavily stigmatized. It was incredibly challenging for our team to be the first to speak openly about mental illness.

In 2019, the Clubhouse launched a psychoeducation project called Potret. We did six interviews with people living with mental disorders (schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, depression) in which they spoke sincerely about what their lives were like. Volunteer artists made portraits of them, and we arranged a public exhibition with those pictures and stories.

In fact, that was the first time in our country when mental illness was discussed openly, so we really hoped to attract some media coverage.

We sent our release to each and every newspaper in our country. But as soon as journalists heard the exhibition was about “lunatics”, they declined our invitation and even laughed at us. Only European Radio Liberty supported the exhibition.

The next challenge was the reaction to our event from the general public. We received multiple comments expressing

¹ Lukashenko’s raid on civil society in July 2021:
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jul/23/belarus-ngos-condemn-government-crackdown-after-black-week-of-raids>

anger, irritation and revolt. Many readers wondered, “Why are these lunatics being given a voice? They would be better off keeping a low profile and staying away from ‘normal’ society.”

As an example, one of our activists, Pavel Lebetsky, is an IT expert, and also writes poetry. We helped him publish his first book, which I later saw people reading and admiring. But when they learned that the author had been treated for schizophrenia, their admiration vanished.

We got terribly upset at first, but our second thought was “It’s really time to change something in public attitudes to mental illness!”.

So the same year we dared to announce a large psychoeducational festival called “Voices,” the first of its kind in Belarus as well. We invited both psychiatrists and patients to speak up on the same stage. We wanted to make this event a real festival, with creative workshops, personal stories, and interactive discussions on mental health issues that would be both educational and fun. Most people in Belarus are scared to death to deal with mental institutions so we wanted to demonstrate that psychiatrists can be qualified and respectful.

We had a huge amount of trouble finding a place for this event! When the leaseholders heard that we were planning to gather a crowd of mental patients, they simply stopped responding. Finally, we found an old factory building in Minsk. Its new owners had been making renovations to turn it into a loft, and they allowed artists and educators to use this space with no conveniences for free.

There were wooden pipes and bare bricks all around, but we couldn’t complain — 200 people attended our festival and liked it immensely! Some of them decided to join us as volunteers, some made donations.

At the same time, the professional community accepted us with great warmth. Many psychotherapists encouraged us,

“You are doing the right thing! Finally there is a patient’s community emerging in our country!”.

Many specialists wanted to support us, but they had to struggle with national bureaucracy.

Private psychiatry hardly exists in Belarus so almost all doctors and most of the psychotherapists are employed by state institutions. They aren't allowed to take part in anything without receiving official permission from the Ministry of Health.

Many specialists lamented,
“We'd like to join you, but we can't do anything, we'll lose our jobs.”

The state can fire doctors for as little as an interview with an independent media organization, or for participating in an event organized by an NGO. They just force them to leave.

The key challenge for our psychiatric system is that, basically, we still have a Soviet system. It has made almost no progress since the 1980s.

Haloperidol (*a typical 1960's antipsychotic with severe side effects*) is often prescribed for all manner of diseases. Besides, a lot of unnecessary violence takes place: patients are commonly tied up, beaten and subjected to verbal abuse.

As was the case in the USSR, people with mental diseases are nowadays deprived of a huge range of human rights. The Soviet system of psychiatric registration is still in place.

This means that if you've ever been taken to a mental ward and received almost any psychiatric diagnosis, you have to prove before a special committee that you have recovered (which is almost impossible). Otherwise, you lose many rights permanently, such as the right to work in certain areas, including educational and state institutions, or even drive a car. And you cannot hide previous hospitalizations — any employer is able to apply to a local psychiatric dispensary with an inquiry about a candidate's mental health.

Psychiatric registry

In Belarus every person diagnosed with any mental disorder in a state mental institution is automatically added to a registry of patients with mental illness for a period of 25 years. This list includes people with all kinds of diagnoses, from postpartum depression to schizophrenia.

This status means restrictions on a range of civil rights. A mentally ill person isn't permitted to drive a motor vehicle and be employed in state institutions including schools and universities, and is obliged to undergo regular check-ups in a mental ward.

Any state institution is able to make an inquiry to a psychiatric dispensary record about the mental health of any individual.

This kind of exclusionary system existed in all republics of the former USSR¹. By 1991, there were 10 million people registered as mental patients. After the fall of the Union, the system was reformed and upgraded in Russia and several other countries, but not in Belarus.

If you've been diagnosed with a mental illness, your best hope is to become officially "invalid", even if you're young and strong. The state's idea is that you should get registered as disabled, receive your 250 Rubles pension per month (about 100 dollars) and forget about any ambitions of living a fulfilling life.

People discharged from mental hospitals here are, on the whole, destined for loneliness and confusion. Their families often don't realize that rehabilitation is a long process and the hospital only helps to survive acute phases of the illness. They say, "So you're fine now, why don't you go and find a job?"

Finding a job is one of the toughest things for ex-patients. Most of them are able to work, and many still have the right

¹ Psychiatry as a tool of repression in the USSR and Post-Soviet countries, European Parliament report [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/Reg-Data/etudes/etudes/join/2013/433723/EXPO-DROI_ET\(2013\)433723_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/Reg-Data/etudes/etudes/join/2013/433723/EXPO-DROI_ET(2013)433723_EN.pdf)²

² https://ridero.ru/link/w4UKMJih_2mSm9

to do this. But when employers see the paperwork confirming the diagnosis, these individuals are simply not considered. The best-case scenario is that the person is hired in manual labor, such as a loader or cleaner, even if they hold a Master's degree.

At our Clubhouse, we do our best to help people find work. But most frequently, the extent of our possibilities is settling them through our personal connections. On several occasions, employers have asked us to come and guarantee them that our members will behave "normally".

"A priest announced that I was possessed by demons"

I've experienced many aspects of stigma myself. I suffered severe depression throughout my university years, but was too scared to apply for help. I held off for years, trying to convince myself that I was overthinking, and maybe it would pass if I just waited. My father, who suffered from panic attacks for years, told me he'd experienced the same thing.

One morning, I was feeling so horrible that I made up my mind to kill myself. I wrote a note,

"All these years have passed in vain. Don't blame anyone for my death".

But I didn't actually do anything because, at the same moment, my telephone rang. The prefect called and asked why I was missing lectures. I replied that I couldn't arrive because I didn't want to live at all. This kind girl rushed to my dorm and we had a long and relieving conversation. But it didn't stop my depression.

I managed to graduate University and was sent to work as a teacher in the provincial town of Ivey (in Belarus, if your study fees are paid from government funds, you have to work for the state for two years afterwards).

I was overloaded and overwhelmed with work as a history teacher, gymnastics coach, and homeroom teacher, as well as a substitute for several other teachers that were absent. That

was too much for me. Every morning, I struggled to go to school. I had compulsive thoughts about suicide. I still wanted to live though, and I finally made up my mind to seek psychiatric help.

I was fortunate to meet a very experienced psychiatrist, who immediately understood that I had bipolar disorder. She sent me to a hospital in Novinki for a couple of months. The treatment was good, and I recovered from that depressive episode.

The Hospital in Novinki [7], officially called the Scientific and Practical Center for Mental Health, is the leading psychiatric hospital and research center in Belarus. It provides better quality medical treatment compared to other mental wards in the country, but, still, stigmatizing attitudes towards patients are not uncommon there.

The hardest part was to accept that I was seriously ill, and subsequently facing severe stigma.

My colleagues at school learned that I had been in a mental institution and the news spread like wildfire. I wasn't dismissed immediately only because of staff shortage in that particular rural area.

But I felt like I was locked in a kind of exclusion zone. Over the next few months, I lost most of my friends and the trust of my colleagues. I became the target of offensive remarks, people constantly reminded me that they didn't trust me because I was a nut. Some parents of my students wouldn't allow their kids to go on field trips with me, "because I was dangerous and could attack them with a knife".

A bizarre incident happened during a church holiday service. A priest announced before a crowd of locals that I was possessed by demons and everybody was told that they needed to pray for me. After that, people literally pointed fingers at me, and elderly women crossed themselves when they passed me on the street. I couldn't handle that pressure and decided to stop taking my meds and pretend to be "normal".

As a result, I very quickly developed mania. During my first manic episode, I attempted to free a lion from the Minsk

zoo. I felt so sorry for this powerful animal sitting sadly in his cage. On another occasion, I made up my mind to fly to China in search of inner harmony. I was convinced that this trip would cure me. My aunt rushed to the airport and stopped me.

Daily struggle for survival

After all these difficulties, I realized that I had no other choice but to adapt to life with mental illness, and change my habits completely.

Life with bipolar disorder is a daily struggle. Many things that healthy people take for granted are an intense effort for me. I've stuck to my psychiatrist's prescriptions, and it's now my fourth year in remission.

I've been unable to work in education any more because of my diagnosis. For some time I worked as a freelance copywriter. When I was surfing for information on bipolar disorder, I learned that there were peer support groups in Russia, and thought that it was exactly what I needed.

I decided to organize a similar group in Minsk and found a space for this in the Clubhouse. First I became a volunteer there and met many people facing the same problems as me, who hadn't given up. They found friends and hobbies, hope. At last, I felt that I was in the right place, and that I could help myself by helping others.

By the end of 2019 the director of the Clubhouse left, and it turned out that there were no candidates with relevant experience to replace her. That's how I became the leader of the Minsk Clubhouse.

When the arrests in Minsk started, my first impulse was to run and hide. To take a holiday, return to my dad's apartment and lay low until the nightmare ended.

But if I bury my head in the sand, the violence will not disappear. This is a deep scar on our society that will ache for many years to come.

For a few weeks I've felt that my condition was deteriorating, and noticed depressive signs. Only the thought that so many of my compatriots are suffering much more these dark days keeps me moving.

If you wish to know more about Open Soul Clubhouse, you're welcome to contact Pavel:
nepavelp@gmail.com

Recorded in August, 2020

“I’ve started my life from scratch ten times”, – Stas Tolstokorov, entrepreneur and head of the public organization “BARvinOK” in Kyiv

“I started behaving violently after the divorce with my wife. She got scared and called an ambulance. I was brought to the mental hospital “Burashevo” in the Tver region, Central Russia.

In hospital, I got absorbed by the idea that I was so powerful that no bars could stop me. So I started dismantling the wall in the bathroom with my bare hands, breaking the pipes. I flooded the whole ward and gathered a crowd of onlookers, both patients and staff.

The doctors ended up calling the anti-riot police to calm me down. They twisted my hands behind my back, cuffed me to the bed, and gave me injections. It wasn’t until three days later that I opened my eyes again.

My father was leaning over me: “What happened, son?”

The only thing I managed to say was: “Dad, everything’s alright, just misbehaved a bit”.



Stas is an athletic man of 55 year old who, due to his decisive movements and confident speech, appears much younger than his age. Without knowing his story beforehand, it would be impossible to guess that he has been through multiple hospitalizations due to experiencing periods of psychosis. Each time, Stas stubbornly started his life anew, mastered new professions, created businesses and participated in social movements.

A few years ago, he gathered a team of like-minded people and founded the first support center in the Ukraine for people with mood disorders. Stas is convinced that a diagnosis should not prevent a person from living a life of their choosing. But to do this, people need to defeat the stigma within their own minds first and stop considering themselves unfit to make choices for their own lives.

Shift-like schizophrenia

In the 1980's, back in the time of the USSR, I managed to obtain a rare military specialty — in quantum electronics and laser technology. I was sent to serve in Kazakhstan at a ballistic missile tracking station. The station had been under construction and wasn't completed during my tenure, so I was essentially the head of a nonexistent laboratory in the middle of endless steppe.

At the age of 22 I became stricken with indifference. I wondered, "Why am I living at all?" I had recently married my high school sweetheart and we had a daughter. But nothing brought me joy. Later on, I was transferred to an administrative position in Tver, Russia, where things got even worse: I spent my time on utterly pointless paperwork, reports that no one needed. In the end, my boss and I didn't see eye to eye and I started drinking.

Triggered by alcohol, an "acceleration" began: a swarm of thoughts and ideas in my head making it impossible to fall asleep. After three nights of no sleep, I felt so horrible that I called myself an ambulance. But as soon as I got into a military hospital, I decided to escape. I left at 2 a.m. and started to wander around the town barefoot and shirtless. I walked until my feet bled. Soon after that, I was hospitalized again, involuntarily. However, the insomnia continued in the hospital. I could no longer gather my thoughts, only one remained: "Why am I suffering so terribly?"

They tried to treat me with electric shock therapy but to no avail. Eventually, I was sent to Moscow to the infamous Kashchenko psychiatric hospital (remember Vysotsky's song about Kashchenko?) There, I was subjected to insulin therapy. The essence of this "treatment" is putting the patient into an induced coma and then bringing them out of it. The sensations are horrible. When you return from the other world to this one, the only thing left of you is animal reflex.

At that time, in 1991 in Kaschenko, I got my first diagnosis — shift-like schizophrenia, and ended up being discharged from military service.

Shift-like schizophrenia is a term describing a course of disease when episodes of acute psychosis alternate with periods of remission. Soviet psychiatrists believed that the symptoms become more severe with time and lead to irreversible personality defects: after numerous psychotic episodes, a person becomes lethargic, apathetic and loses clarity of thought forever.

Insulin coma (also called insulin shock therapy) is a method of intensive biological therapy in psychiatry that involves artificially inducing a coma in a patient by administering large doses of insulin. This is an extremely painful practice that can lead to a prolonged coma and death. Clinical studies in the 1950's-1960's proved the method was dangerous and ineffective, so this practice was discontinued in many countries. In the USSR and later in Russia, the use of the insulin coma was limited but not stopped completely. The method is mentioned in Russian guidelines for the treatment of schizophrenia (2004) as a reserve line therapy.

Kashchenko psychiatric hospital (named after Soviet psychiatrist Pyotr Kashchenko) is the former name for Russia's main psychiatric facility. This word became a generic name for all mental wards in the country. In the 1960s-1980s, the hospital had been involved in punitive psychiatry policy, labeling opposition leaders mentally ill and placing them into forced treatment.

Among the patients was famous Soviet bard Vladimir Vysotsky, who had a real diagnosis of alcohol addiction. Vysotsky composed several songs reflecting on that experience (“Song about doctors” and “Clinical Record”).

I started behaving violently after the divorce with my wife. She got scared and called an ambulance. I was brought to the mental hospital Burachevo in the Tver region, Central Russia, the hospital put into song by another bard, Mikhail Krug¹.

In hospital, I got absorbed by the idea that I was so powerful that no bars could stop me. So I started dismantling the wall in the bathroom with my bare hands, breaking the pipes. I flooded the whole ward and gathered a crowd of onlookers, both patients and staff.

The doctors ended up calling the anti-riot police to calm me down. They twisted my hands behind my back, cuffed me to the bed, and gave me injections. It was only three days later that I opened my eyes again.

My father was leaning over me: “What happened, son?”

The only thing I managed to respond was: “Dad, everything’s alright, just misbehaved a bit”.

Involuntary hospitalizations

I was hospitalized 10 times in total — and each time it was involuntary because of my aggressive behavior. At first, I didn’t have severe depression, most often it was mania or a psychotic episode.

Each time, it was a similar scenario: an emergency unit or the police would be called by frightened relatives or colleagues. I acted defiantly and aggressively, bossing everyone around from my family to sales clerks and random passersby.

I was taken away for a few weeks and injected with huge amounts of antipsychotics. The episode passed, I recovered and went on living my life as if nothing had happened. I’ve always been in sound physical health and I’m an athlete, a master in military pentathlon and proficient in combat.

¹ “In Burachevo, all husbands are nuts” — a line from the song “Red Pockets” by popular 1990’s bard Mikhail Krug.

Once, they even tried to bring a criminal case against me: I was accused of attempted murder. I had an ugly breakup with my girlfriend in a manic episode, and her mother turned out to be a local prosecutor and decided to take revenge. I had to spend some time in pre-trial detention, but since there was no evidence of violence, the case fell apart.

Years later, I figured out that these breakdowns into mania and psychosis had a certain pattern. Each one of them had some sort of stress or trigger behind it — business problems or a breakup with a woman I loved (of which there were plenty). Each time, I thought that that was it, the last love of my life, and it would throw me into despair.

Business

I wasn't too upset about my failed military career. I was discharged from service when Perestroika was in full swing. Soon, the USSR collapsed and a lot of opportunities opened up for private business. I dove into this topic headon, dealing in trade and supplying materials to construction projects. I spent some time working in an energy concern where I was coordinating the supply of electrical equipment.

In 2005, my comrade and I had a small business in Moscow. Then I got swept up by another mania. At that time, I was already aware that something like that could happen and warned my comrade to send me to the doctor if he noticed anything wrong. But that didn't work out in practice.

When my partner came to me and said: "Stas, you've got to go to your doctor", I only waved him off: "If you think it's such a great idea, go yourself!". And continued on rampaging.

I took all the money lying in our safe, about five thousand dollars, and blew it in a week. It's hard to remember what I spent the money on, but it was gone instantly. I went on a bender and spree around bars. To be honest, it's still scary to think of all the places I went to.

I was eventually brought into the hospital by a militia unit. After several sleepless nights somewhere on the outskirts of Moscow, I was found breaking down the door of someone's flat.

After treatment, I tried to get back to work but all my colleagues turned their backs on me. The entire team continued doing business without me. Thus, I was left alone with debts and a collapsing enterprise. It was then that I fell into a real depression. I had no idea what to do, my whole life was going down the drain.

That moment became a turning point. Before that episode, things were going pretty well for me: the business was gaining momentum, and I still had time to engage in social activities.

In Moscow, in 2006, I finally got an appointment with a competent doctor, a professor who had spent some time working in the USA. He finally saw that my problem was not schizophrenia but bipolar disorder. And he convinced me that it was possible to live a normal life with it, that quite a few people managed it, including some very famous figures. Among his clients were deputies, actors and businessmen.

The doctor explained that it was necessary to develop a specific medication regimen, such as with Lithium, have regular appointments, and ideally go to psychotherapy. He said that if I spot "acceleration" from the very start, I could stop it with one to two injections. And even if not, my state could be brought back to normal within a few weeks at the hospital.

That was the first time that I agreed with a psychiatrist and took my treatment more seriously. In the 15 years prior to that, I hadn't had systematic treatment, nor had I taken any medication other than during my time in hospital. I'd never considered myself schizophrenic and because of this, I'd been resisting treatment.

In the years which followed, I started to build my life back up, started a new business and resurrected the relationship with my only daughter.

Maidan, or how I became the Sheriff

In the 2010's, I moved to Kyiv where my mother lived, earned Ukrainian citizenship, and enthusiastically dove into its social life.

When Maidan started in Ukraine in 2014, I was an activist in the non-governmental organization "Officers' Corps". Our mission was to unite officers from all branches of the armed forces and departments — the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Security Service, the Ministry of Defence. I became deputy chief of staff for finances in this organization.

Euromaidan (2013–2014) was a months-long spontaneous protest in support of Ukraine's integration into the European Union. It began in Kyiv's Maidan Square in November 2013 after President Viktor Yanukovich refused to sign Ukraine's association agreement with the European Union.

The protests and their violent suppression led to a change in power: Yanukovich was forced to flee the country, and opposition candidate Petro Poroshenko won the elections. The replacement of Ukraine's pro-Russian leader with a pro-European one provoked a conflict with Russia. In the spring of 2014, armed men occupied Crimea and Eastern Ukraine cities Donetsk and Luhansk.

Collisions between the pro-Russian militants and the Ukrainian army in the Donetsk region continued for years. More than 12,000 people have been killed, including more than 3,000 civilians.

Ukraine considers the occupation of its territories as Russian aggression but Russia denies its involvement despite substantial proof of the presence of its military personnel¹.

During Maidan, we took a neutral peacekeeping stance. During the wave of reforms, I promoted the idea of creating a public municipal police force, an independent people's police, an analog of the sheriff system in the United States. We wanted the people to choose the sheriff in a given area them-

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/aug/18/new-video-evidence-of-russian-tanks-in-ukraine-european-court-human-rights>

selves so that the issues of order and safety would be addressed by those who are trusted.

The nickname “Sheriff” stuck to me throughout Maidan because I resolved conflicts and maintained order during the public actions. There were many different activists and a lot of slippery moments when arguments arose, so my negotiation skills were in demand.

Our idea was supported by the European Party of Ukraine¹. Its leader, deputy Nikolai Katerinchuk, was running for mayor of Kyiv and included the creation of a people’s police force in his election program. Together we calculated how many sheriffs the city would need, planned the required budget, and even created a sheriff’s star.

But in the end, Katerinchuk lost the election and announced that he was no longer interested in the project. Just as it so often happens with deputies: they promise you mountains of gold before elections with little to be seen in practice.

I tried to promote the sheriff system for another year, but then realized that the state wasn’t interested in creating a parallel force structure in competition with the official police. So I became disillusioned with the idea and switched my focus to other tasks.

Then I got into another complicated amorous relationship in Kyiv. For a long time, I couldn’t gather enough courage to tell my partner about my illness. Eventually, I decided to take her with me to talk to my doctor. They deeply disliked each other from the very start.

My lady decided that my doctor was treating me in the wrong way. She demanded that I change my “Soviet-era” psychiatrist for a “young and progressive” one. Without taking

¹ European Party of Ukraine is a Ukrainian political party of social-liberal ideology. Between 2006 and 2014, it advocated Ukraine’s integration into the European Union. The party leader Mykola Katerynychuk gained 5% of the votes in the 2014 Kyiv mayoral elections.

time to really figure me out, the new doctor prescribed me strong antidepressants. I was thrown into mania. And in a state of mania, the sky's the limit for me, I don't listen to anyone.

I had my last episode in 2018 in Kyiv after a long remission. I had a very reliable partner back then, we kept an eye on my mental state together and took action in time.

But my family problems were the thing that really got me down. At that time, I had been living with my elderly mother for four years, taking care of her, helping her to recover from several surgeries. It was emotionally challenging, the hopelessness of the situation was dispiriting, and I was becoming exhausted. I dove into my mother's problems so deeply that I completely stopped caring about my own health. Not even a mentally healthy person would be able to take care of a seriously ill mother on a daily basis. At some point, I started trying to break free, to live some kind of life of my own, and ended up at the hospital again.

After that episode, I settled my mother into an assisted living facility and my life got a lot easier. Now I have a relatively stable relationship with a woman who understands me and recognizes my limitations, thank God for that.

“The system has barely changed in 30 years”

I have over 30 years of experience with the state psychiatric system, I've been in hospitals in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus where my father used to live.

The saddest situation was probably in “Burashevo” in the Tver region of central Russia, especially back then, in the 1990's. The hospital was badly neglected, the atmosphere was discouraging, and staying there for weeks was terribly hard. The poverty was apparent in everything: from the state of the premises to the inedible food. But I can't say anything bad about most of the staff — when I myself was adequate enough, they were friendly.

Of course, when faced with aggressive manias, the personnel acted harshly: used handcuffs, tied me up. Perhaps, they had no choice, because there were moments when I threatened people, screaming that I would take hostages if they refused to let me go. Typically, they sedated me with medication in a drink after which I would simply fall to the ground.

There were, unfortunately and as often, some absolute jerks among the staff who abused their power over the patients. I quickly realized that they were bullying those who were weak and unable to stand up for themselves, and didn't allow them to treat me like that.

The Ukrainian hospitals, I'd say, were okay. Peaceful staff, bearable conditions. The patients in acute states were first placed in an observation ward where the regimen is stricter than elsewhere: they can't leave the room and are taken to the toilet under supervision. Then, as their wellbeing improves, they're transferred to a regular ward where they can go on walks and socialize.

In my view, not a huge lot has fundamentally changed in mental hospitals in the post-Soviet era in the past 30 years. It continues to be a discouraging atmosphere you want to escape from as soon as possible.

Hospitals would be more helpful if the approach to treatment changed profoundly. People typically arrive in one of two states: either aggressive or depressed. Mostly, they don't need a whole lot to get back to normal: medical treatment, some civilized leisure activity and friendly communication. If all these three things were available, I think people would be considerably more positive about psychiatric treatment.

Unfortunately, right now, Ukrainian healthcare is moving in a totally different direction from what I think it should. Massive healthcare reforms are in progress aimed at creating a system of family doctors following the Western European tradition. The idea itself isn't bad, but the issues of mental health in Ukraine are, as usual, the last priority. Funding for

psychiatric care is being cut desperately, the number of dispensaries and their staff are being reduced.

Psychiatric hospitals are allocated minimal funds that allow no “excesses” whatsoever. So they cut down on everything possible: reducing staff, dismissing psychologists, closing rehabilitation centers. This leads to some patients ending up on the streets.

The head of the psychoneurological dispensary in Kyiv where I now lead a support group was totally perplexed: “How can a family doctor help a mentally ill person in an acute state? When a person in psychosis comes to the polyclinic the staff is plainly afraid to go out to them”.

You can’t just close down psychiatric hospitals without organizing proper outpatient care. It appears that Ukraine is destroying a more or less functional system without creating anything to replace it.

Healthcare system reform in Ukraine

In 2020, a healthcare system reform started in Ukraine that cut the funding of psychiatric hospitals down to 20–30% of the necessary amount. This policy led to a series of mass protests of psychiatric staff¹. The chief doctor of the psychiatric hospital in Kyiv stated that in order to meet these funds, every third employee would have to be fired. The Lviv Regional Psychiatric Hospital admitted that there wasn’t even enough money for medication and food for patients.

The reforms suggest that hospitals should earn the lacking funds through their own means via paid services. Meanwhile, the vast majority of patients can’t afford treatment.

¹ <https://112.international/society/insidious-medical-reform-why-mental-hospitals-employees-protest-51670.html>

How to stay in shape

I understand now that almost all hospitalizations can be prevented if you notice the early symptoms and don't wait until the last moment to reach for help. Besides that, it's necessary to organize one's lifestyle in a way that doesn't provoke new episodes. In my case most deteriorations were provoked by conflicts with loved ones, lack of sleep, and alcohol.

You have to admit that you're the only person responsible for your health and you can't put this responsibility on someone else, even the closest and most loving people in your life.

It's necessary to regularly monitor your own well-being, for example, with mood trackers. The main difficulty with doing that is to remain critical of yourself, to answer the questions about your condition honestly, to try not to lie. If I notice that my mood is elevated for several days in a row, accompanied by the inability to sleep, I'd rather consider it a mild manic episode and go to the doctor right away than deceive myself and drag it out to the last.

The involvement of loved ones is very important as they also keep an eye on my mental state and can say: "Listen, it's starting. Let's do something about it." Right now, I'm getting help with that from my partner Lena, my friends, and peers from my support group.

A healthy lifestyle is crucial. For me, that means regular strength training, swimming, and long walks. Resuming physical activity has always been my first step out of depression, getting back to exercise at the first available opportunity. Often, even at the hospital, as soon as they stop giving me antipsychotics. When locked inside, I would stand on my fists in the room, do push-ups, get other patients involved in exercises. I pulled one guy out of a nearly vegetative state that way — by working out with him regularly while he was at the hospital.

Taking the first step is always hard. But the second is by far easier. I start with minimal exercise and build it up

gradually encouraging myself: I'm doing well, I've got this! Along with physical strength comes confidence in your abilities, that something else could work out.

Stigma: external and internal

Stigma presses upon anyone with a mental disorder from two sides: from society and from the person themselves in the form of self-stigmatization. While external stigma depends on the people around us, internal stigma depends solely on ourselves.

I believe that Ukrainian society is advanced and educated enough to be able to view people with mental disorders adequately and to accept them. But we first have to learn not to stigmatize ourselves.

Many people ask themselves: "I'm sick, who would want to be around me?". But it's not true. In the course of my life, I've found that how we are perceived depends on the way we put ourselves out into the world.

I decided to start speaking openly about my illness back in 2013 and haven't had any serious regrets to this day. In fact, at that moment I had nothing to lose. The diagnosis didn't prevent me from having a small business and, for myself, I decided that I didn't want to have anything to do with people with heads full of prejudices, and I should let them leave of their own volition. It's like a litmus test for me: whether it's a real relationship or not.

BARvinOK

The problem for people with mental illnesses is that after hospitals, they often fall out of society. Their family and acquaintances don't accept them. They feel like outcasts and have no idea how to move on with their lives. They're even considered socially dangerous, a lot of people thought so about me.

In 2016, I decided to start helping people with bipolar disorder.

I went on the Internet to search for people who do something like that and found out about the support groups functioning in Moscow and activists in Minsk. Like-minded people gathered immediately. My friend Alexander Maniukov wrote the charter for the community and started the first support group for bipolar people in Kyiv. We wondered what to do next.

In 2017, we decided to register a public organization called “BARvinOK”¹ to combine our resources and help others like us.

“Barvinok” is the Ukrainian name of periwinkle, a flower known for its resilience. We interpret the name as follows: You have BAR [bipolar disorder], and that’s OK! Our slogan is “from sickness and misunderstanding to a healthy, full life”.

We set ourselves a goal to get not only psychologists and doctors involved, but also business consultants, coaches and trainers to help people with bipolar disorder discover their abilities and socialize.

In 2019, there emerged the idea of Clubhouse: a place people would be able to come to any day with their problems, where they’d always be heard and offered help. But that requires a permanent space.

We found an office, almost in the center of Kyiv, at a psychoneurological dispensary. We went through a complicated bureaucratic process to coordinate a preferential lease with all the agencies. At the beginning of 2020, we started regular events: educational lectures, group and individual consultations with psychotherapists and coaches. All of our specialists work on a volunteer basis.

¹ BARvinOK non-profit on Facebook: <https://web.facebook.com/barwinokhelp/>

But then the coronavirus pandemic struck and face-to-face meetings became impossible. We proceeded to master the on-line format: all year, we held events three times a week via video conferences. Recently, we opened a second support group in Kharkiv and we're also trying to get a group together in Odessa.

The classes proved to be popular, so we became confident that the Clubhouse was our first priority. We decided that we'd help not only people with bipolar, but also those with related disorders — schizoaffective disorder, borderline personality disorder, chronic depression etc.

So far, there've been a lot of difficulties: not enough funding, and not enough people as passionate about the idea as I am. But we aren't giving up.

We have an unusual idea to teach people how to run a small business so that they can support themselves. Our coaches could help build a business model and support the routine of the enterprise if a person needs time out for mental health reasons. This idea is based on my own experience, since I've been keeping myself fed thanks to business. I believe this method will work for many people including those whom large companies refuse to hire because of their diagnosis or who are unable to keep up with a standard work schedule themselves.

Recorded in September 2020

Update from March 9, 2022

On February 27 Stas wrote on social media that he rushed to protect Kyiv with the civilian militia and then disappeared.

His wife and friends say that the military operation attack triggered a severe manic episode in him. They started search activities with no results so far.

“It seemed to me that I was a Jesus Christ Superstar”, – Sasha Skochilenko, artist and musician

“Drawing comics brought me fame and income as if at the snap of a finger, even though I’ve never studied it, nor considered myself an artist. I don’t think I would’ve devoted that kind of time and energy to making pictures if it weren’t for that one miraculous event.

In 2014 I decided to draw a comic for my friends to tell them in few and simple words what depression is, and how a person experiences it internally. I simply got tired of explaining the same thing over and over to each new acquaintance.

When a free week came around, I absentmindedly drew a couple dozen pages on someone’s crumbling tablet in the ancient program Flash MX and posted them on my social media page. The same day, the post went viral and all of Runet knew about my depression.

I was crushed by a wave of likes, reposts, posts, calls and messages. Even ex-lovers who’d once rejected me called, suggesting we meet. I received texts from psychologists, people also suffering from depression, as well as relatives and friends of people with depression”.



I first saw Sasha’s “Book about Depression” long before knowing Sasha herself because her comic was talked about widely. It was the first Russian comic about depression, so illustrative and clear that it immediately started being turned into quotes and memes, and having a life of its own.

Sasha Skochilenko (30 years old) is a small and seemingly fragile young woman, nonetheless radiating an immensely strong character and the right kind of stubbornness. This same stubbornness helps her keep living and creating despite numerous obstacles: a dysfunctional family, an aggressive environment and the severe illness against which she has to constantly build new lines of defense.

Communal apartment on Gavanskaya Street

I was born and raised in a dilapidated and gloomy communal flat in Saint Petersburg. In the 1980's, it used to be the dormitory of an artisanal college. My parents had moved there from Sakhalin Island on the opposite side of the country with their dreams of becoming artists.

They got married and stayed there, in a single room for two. There they also raised my sister and me. Several years later, our cousins moved in with us, taking an adjoining room just as small, and some years after that, my father started a new family and moved into the room across the hall.

And that was just our family. The huge communal flat was divided by a corridor with ten rooms, six washbasins, and two toilets on its far walls. Each of the rooms was occupied by several people and the make up of the residents was in constant flux. As often happens in such apartments, all of the common property was in horrific condition. This property was still in state ownership, that is, owned by nobody. So I grew up having nothing of my own.

My father, for as long as I can remember, suffered from severe mood swings and alcoholism. He could be endlessly generous, charming, inventive, effervescent, coming up with fairy tales and lying on the go. But sometimes he would fall into what seemed to be unreasonable despair and then cry and tell us he wanted to die. Besides which, he was cheating on my mother endlessly and went through many women, apartments, and professions.

My father's brother, my uncle, had much less luck. They say he was charming and highly artistic, acted in a folk theater, had long hair and dressed like a hippie. He hanged himself in a pantry when he was 21.

Before I was born, my mother was in a psychiatric hospital for depression and suicide attempts. Soviet psychiatry gave this poor woman, already confused with her life, nothing but haloperidol injections and the contempt

for doctors that she understandably carries with her to this day.

My mother also had severe depression episodes after that but never attempted medical treatment again. Time and time again she insisted that she was the sickest one in the family and that everyone should take care of her.

You have no idea how many things can go wrong in a family of people with mental illnesses who don't monitor their health and behavior in any way at all. Endless fights and screaming, alcoholism, a total lack of money, despair and tears over every little thing in life were an everyday reality in the house I grew up in.

My mother was an extremely anxious woman who enthusiastically tried to "help" herself and her loved ones in every way possible except for actual psychiatric treatment. I was a regular victim of her experiments.

My mother took me to folk healers, dragging me to church services and confessions, making me kneel in prayer for hours. Some of my relatives were even more devout, my home was reigned over by an atmosphere of intense religious fanaticism.

I had more than my fair share of medical violence as well — both due to real health problems (I suffer from celiac disease) but more often because of my mother's hypochondria. She forced me to go to hospitals for painful screenings for any and all "reasons".

I was subjected to a staggering amount of bullying and humiliation. First, I was mocked by my cousins, then by classmates at school. And, throughout my life, by numerous communal flatmates.

When I was 27, I attempted to make that flat at least somewhat suitable to live in. My friends and I embarked on a huge and ambitious renovation to create Gavanskaya Street, a small illusionary world where everything would be just the way I wanted it to be. I had absolutely no previous experience in renovation and everyone around said it wouldn't work out

because I was petite and fragile. I decided to prove otherwise with all my manic stubbornness.

The renovation took a year and a half during which I learned how to work with tools, slept in the middle of a pile of building materials, and even managed to get paint poisoning a few times. But, for the first time in my life, I gained control over my body and along with that, mastered yet one more profession. Last year, I started working as an assistant repair worker and participated in the furnishing of several apartments and even, for example, in the restoration of an ancient cathedral.

Drawing vs music

My truest passion is music. I've been writing songs practically my entire life, I play many different instruments and organize musical jam sessions as well. I've played piano since I was four years old and guitar since I was ten. As well as having mastered different flutes and mandolin, I play electronic instruments. It was only recently that I finally had the money to buy instruments. Before that, I played the ones my friends had graciously given me as presents.

Above all, I adore improvising. I think I could probably play music 20 hours a day if it weren't for my girlfriend's complaints about the noise. My friends and I organize those musical jams for people who, like us, like to improvise with different instruments to come together as a whole. The people who come together range from professional musicians to total novices. People can join in and just pick the strings any way they want even if it's their first time so much as holding an instrument. I try to make sure that our space is free of criticism and professional arrogance. And we truly do make incredible music! In my opinion, everyone has the right to play regardless of "formal education". Let's remember that music historically emerged much earlier than schools and sheet music. It's

a universal form of communication with others that should be accessible to everyone.

Music is my way to relax and at other times power through difficult emotions. Now I write psychedelic-rock guitar songs, compose long lyrics and read them to music like rap.

It's unlikely, however, that music will ever bring me recognition or commercial success. I've decided as a matter of principle not to look for ways to make money from performing, so as not to lose my creative freedom or depend on anyone. Often I feel like other activities take my time away from music but I have to do them in order to generate income. So, I allow the artist in me to feed the musician.

How I woke up famous

My comics brought me fame and some earnings as if at the snap of a finger, even though I had never studied painting, nor considered myself an artist. To be honest, to this day I believe that I can't actually draw. I don't think I would've invested that much time and energy into this work if it weren't for that one miraculous event.

In 2014 I decided to draw a comic for my friends to tell them in few and simple words what depression is, and how a person experiences it internally. I simply got tired of explaining the same thing over and over to each new acquaintance. It was exhausting in spite of their openness.

When I finally had a week free, I absentmindedly drew a couple dozen pages on someone's crumbling tablet in the ancient program Flash MX and posted them on my VKontakte page¹. The same day, the post went viral and all of Runet suddenly knew about my depression.

¹Sasha's first viral post on VK social media service: https://vk.com/wall1180421901_4903

I was crushed by a wave of likes, posts, calls and messages. Even ex-lovers who had once rejected me called, suggesting we meet. Psychologists texted, people also suffering from depression, relatives of people living with depression... Everyone thanked me and sent extraordinarily supportive messages.

Then, offers from publishers started coming in. That same year, I published the first version of “A Book About Depression”. In 2019, it was republished as a gorgeous art book by an Ukrainian publisher. I was asked to translate the comic into Ukrainian, so I had to redraw each and every letter by hand¹.

Volunteers online have translated my book into English and Spanish. The English version was even presented at a festival in Scotland. This comic book has long had a life of its own. People have redrawn it, made videos and memes out of it, and psychologists have printed it out to work with clients.

Last fall, the Higher School of Economics decided to make an entire exhibition out of the pages of “A Book About Depression” in an expansive atrium in the center of Moscow.

Unfortunately, fame soon showed its darker side. Life seemingly sped up — filled with more and more people and events, and the attention began to weigh on me. I started to get scared.

I’d been dreaming of fame and recognition since childhood. And my dream dropped onto my shoulders like a dusty bag of plaster. Hundreds of people were texting me, some of them saying off-putting or aggressive things. For example, I received threatening texts saying “Sasha will die soon and she will feel better”. Some guys said they’d seen me on the streets which obviously triggered a fear of being followed. The work on the book turned out to be a lot, I was in a rush, as I believed that if I didn’t publish it right away, there’d never be another chance.

¹ Sasha’s book in Ukrainian: <https://bizz.monolith.in.ua/ru/books/knyzhka-pro-depresiju>

At the same time, I was studying at university and working as a videographer for a humanitarian project. My task at that time was filming and reporting on the municipal elections in Saint Petersburg for an independent media. I was recording videos of blatant violations of which there were distressingly a lot, which is sadly typical during Russian elections. I managed to film election officials taking unsealed ballots out of the polling station and government workers being driven around on buses to vote in an organized manner. The election committee staff eventually called the police but instead of those actually responsible, I was the one put in the van, continuing my reporting directly from the police station.

This detention sparked a second wave of interest in my persona: the media were constantly calling me, I was giving interviews and writing news articles etc.

The number of incidents couldn't fit in my head anymore, and my overwhelmed brain began to malfunction: I started mixing up people, numbers, days... colors seemed too bright. After a few weeks, I ended up with actual psychotic mania. But I want to tell this story from the beginning.

“I looked in the mirror and couldn't recognize my face”

Since childhood, I remember the devastating feeling of a deep longing and anxiety keeping me awake at night. I shuddered away from everything and hated myself.

In my teenage years, I often wanted to die and made several attempts to do so. Once I drank an entire package of tranquilizer. I cut my hands, chest, and the joints of my fingers with a utility knife. Starting from my teenage years, I abused alcohol to drown out my anxiety.

The healthcare practitioners I often visited advised me to see a psychiatrist but my mother was strongly against it. She used to say they would turn me into a vegetable in a psychiatric hospital and tried to prevent it by any and all means.

At 17, after I passed my exams brilliantly and got into the Theater Academy, where and when it all went downhill. I felt at a complete dead end. I also began to hallucinate. I heard people on the streets whispering about me or laughing at me. I couldn't sleep because of the anxiety, images of slow and painful deaths were ceaselessly scrolling through my head, I just couldn't stop them. I was trying to sleep on a tiered plywood bed almost under the ceiling, but when I closed my eyes I saw the bed collapsing and the boards stabbing through my back.

At a friend's wedding I got terribly drunk and started a fight, and the next morning I realized I needed help. I applied to a psychologist and she sent me to a psychiatrist. The doctor said that I had no choice, I had to go to the hospital and stay there for some weeks. In fact, I was within my rights to refuse and subsequently be treated as an outpatient, but he pressed me.

I was brought into the Skvortsov-Stepanov hospital, a place with a decent reputation. However, the order and living conditions in this institution weren't too different from a prison in many ways. The nurses forced patients to mop the floors and made full use of the stronger and more aggressive folks to control the weaker ones. They demanded that they should bring severely depressed patients who laid down all day to dinner by all means, including force. For these tasks, the nurses rewarded their "helpers" with cigarettes.

Even my father was scared by what was happening. He bribed the staff, took me home, and offered to pay for sessions with a psychotherapist. However, he only paid for the first three sessions after which I had no choice but to get my first job in order to afford the psychotherapy.

At first, I only suffered from depression. I was quite surprised when at the age of 24, after the publication of my book and the fame that had crushed me, my psyche gifted me with psychotic mania. The butterflies in my stomach were fluttering with such acute force that it made me nauseous. I started

having serious attention problems, sometimes forgetting what day it was and whether I had to go to work or not. The contours of numbers and letters shifted mysteriously before my eyes. I could get on the wrong bus, see a different number, I would talk to strangers on the street, seeing the faces of my friends in them. Lectures at the university seemed so astonishing that I constantly interrupted the professors with never-ending questions.

The feeling of exhilarating euphoria made my chin cramp and teeth quiver, making sleep almost impossible. I lost 10 kilograms, simply forgetting to eat in the chaos of activities. Sounds started to disturb me, I was hearing too many. All objects appeared to be glowing from within, and in the air among the extraordinarily bright colors, I saw white decompose into the spectrum. If I argued with someone, I couldn't stop until I made them cry, I lost the ability to control myself.

After two months of euphoria, I became extremely fixated on the musical “Jesus Christ Superstar”. At first, I was simply mesmerized by its beauty. But then I started believing that I myself was the hippie Jesus of the second coming and that I would have to die on the cross for the salvation of humankind. I looked in the mirror but couldn't recognize my own face.

Hallucinations frightened me a lot combined with great shame and fear, so I went to a psychiatrist for the second time. He advised me to start a course of antipsychotic medication. They slowed my life down and, in time, brought me back to an “adequate” perception of the world, but didn't save me from the severe apathetic depression that caved in upon me afterward.

Later on, I figured out that I'd been having mild manias since adolescence — periods of euphoric productivity and inspiration that lasted for months. I was just treating them as a matter of course, imagining that everyone had black and white streaks in life. Based on the treatment scheme, I assume that the doctors had suspected me of having bipolar disorder before but for some reason hadn't told me.

Treatment experience: good and bad simultaneously

I've been looking for a long time, too long, and I'm still looking for effective ways to maintain my mental balance. All my experiences of treatment have been both successful and unsuccessful: some methods helped for a while and then stopped working. I constantly have to adapt to changes in life and my own psyche: manias and depressions become stronger, money runs out, hobbies lose their appeal.

I've tried many options, both traditional and not. First, let me list what didn't help: sleep deprivation, hunger cure, Hellinger's Family Constellations, ThetaHealing, hallucinogens.

The benefits of psychotherapy aren't yet completely apparent for me either. I went to psychoanalysis sessions for a long time, and later to Gestalt therapy, in total for nearly 10 years.

Psychotherapists taught me that I had to stop suppressing my emotions and express them instead, to admit my right to anger, and then the nightmarish memories would let go of me. But it hasn't worked. No matter how much I talk about my terrible childhood, parents, cousins, or past, I only become angrier. This pain has no intention of letting go.

Pills and psychiatric counseling have given me the best results so far, and remain my principal means of treatment. But medical treatment isn't an easy road either.

While trying to find a treatment regimen that works for several years, I've experienced almost every possible weird and frightening side effect.

One drug gave me a fever of 37.3°C for weeks; another made me lose weight rapidly and my weight plunged to 43 kilos; the third made my hands tremble, making it impossible for me to play music. There was also nausea, phobias, headaches, upset stomachs, apathy, anorgasmia, akathisia (when you can't sit still or even stand in one place).

Selecting and sifting through different medications, I constantly had to weigh the severity of depression on one side of the scale and the repulsion of side effects on the other. When you have to make it through an acute episode, anything and everything seems a fair price. But when you take medication for years on end, even the consequences that the doctors consider innocuous can get the last of you.

The dosages went up as the years went by since my tolerance to the drugs increased and the episodes became worse. I often didn't have enough money for the original medications and had to buy generic versions, many of which didn't help at all.

I hope that one day my wallet will get a bit thicker and I'll be able to afford the expensive imported drugs.

Generics are copies of the original medications containing the same active ingredients but made by other companies. Most often, they are copies of American and Western European medications made in Asia and Eastern Europe. Generics are much cheaper than the original but their quality may be lower due to differences in the manufacturing process.

I can't muster up the courage to start taking lithium because of the panic and fear of hospitals and examinations instilled in me by my mother. If you take lithium regularly, you have to undergo regular blood tests. I know that I'll keep sabotaging these tests until the last possible moment.

A lot also depends on lifestyle. Sleepless nights or waking up at 6 a.m. can be very damaging to my wellbeing, so I try to avoid it.

Running saves me, especially in the morning — to feel my body and give myself a workout.

Six years ago, I gave up alcohol completely and some time later, nicotine and amphetamines. I stopped reading news and social media feeds because they only served to increase my anxiety.

Stigma was most severe at home and at the hospital

Oddly enough, I faced the most harsh forms of stigmatization within my family, at home, and at the hospital — that is to say, the places where a person should feel secure.

In the psychiatric hospital, I was subjected to an unimaginably contemptuous and rude attitude from the staff and doctors: derogatory nicknames, mockery, an arbitrarily orderly tone. When I was discharged from the district psychoneurological dispensary, the head doctor said: “Just look at yourself, I bet you’ll come crawling back to us in a couple of months”.

The attitude of the neighbors in the communal apartment I lived in for 29 years was also repulsive. My neighbor yelled profanities at me for no reason, and if I tried to object, his favorite argument was “Are you going crazy? You’re having another episode, I’m calling the asylum.”

For most of my life I had an unsupportive, if not hostile, environment. I survived depression not thanks to my family but in spite of them.

I was forced to communicate with people who didn’t understand at all and bullied me. Only after many years of psychotherapy I achieved a profound certainty that things could be different.

Talking about my illness openly changed my life for the better. I found people who took my problems seriously, somewhat affecting many of my old friends too, and we started to understand each other better. I learned to accept help and support and formulate precisely what kind of help I needed. Given my stubborn character, that wasn’t at all an easy task!

I now live with my girlfriend Sonya. When we decided to move in together, we were really nervous about not being able to get along, since we both have tricky personalities and mental characteristics, to put it mildly. But we were absolutely fed up with the homophobia that was inescapable in our communal flat.

One neighbor, a huge, angry man, was constantly insulting me and my girlfriend. The first thing he said when he saw Sonya was, “You bitch, get out of here!” His wife also came running to nod along, “What is she even doing here? Who is she to you?” The neighbors yelled and threatened to call the cops to kick the supposed “intruder” out of the apartment.

Sonya knows about depression first hand. She’s chronically depressed, and also, for her own reasons, resistant, which means that almost no medication can help her. We understand each other 100 percent and support one another as best we can.

The funny thing is that Sonya used to be a psychiatric nurse and even worked at a prison hospital for some time. If in my youth, someone had told me I would fall in love with “the enemy”, I would’ve been mortified.

How to get along for two people with chronic depression.

Advice from Sasha

- **Support first!**

Support from a loved one helps reverse depression. It gives you the strength to keep living. It allows you to distract yourself from painful physical sensations and thoughts.

However supporting a person who has chronic depression is terribly difficult. That I can solemnly declare as a person with depression and as a partner of a person with depression. You may feel like your words are being ignored as if they are being flushed away by a wave of pessimism as if they mean nothing. The feeling of despair and hopelessness in this state can be so truly potent that a person is simply not able to believe it could get better.

- **Listen instead of lecturing**

Don’t admonish or advise. It’s often enough just to listen or sympathize.

- **Be patient**

You need to have patience. Are your words, hugs and tenderness, help with house chores and care not helping? That's not your fault. All of this will work when your loved one is able to accept and appreciate this help. Their pessimism doesn't mean that your efforts are in vain!

- **Don't take it personally**

It's important to learn not to take the unpleasant behavior of a depressed one to heart. A person in such a state isn't always kind: sometimes they're annoyed and exasperated by virtually everything including your attempts. A loved one can be unfair and blinded by their grief and it's not their fault.

- **Sometimes it's best to leave them be**

Nevertheless, if you're persistently asked not to do or say something (after all, everyone has their own ideas of support), just leave the person be. When the right time comes, they'll come to you, hug you, and thank you for what you've done for them.

- **Don't forget about yourself**

Most importantly: don't forget to take care of yourself. If you feel that you've broken down too, don't hide it. Perhaps your loved one will support you as best they can by discovering the new inner reserves that love can provide.

You aren't obliged nor should you tolerate rude or abusive behavior either. Try to softly but persistently define the limits of your assistance and save your own resources.

- **Get other people involved**

Supporting a depressed person for a long time is very hard, so it's best not to put the entire burden on yourself. Get other friends and acquaintances involved if possible.

My perfect day

I've been presented in the press in every possible way: "artist", "comic book author", "self-taught cartoonist", "videographer", "journalist", "activist", "musician". All of these are indeed part of my endless list of creative hobbies and actual jobs. Only, like many others, you can't pack me into any singular one of these labeled boxes.

I studied anthropology at Saint Petersburg State University and even wrote an article about how President Putin's New Year's speeches have changed over the years of his reign. (It turns out that as time passed, the figure of Putin in the frame has been growing larger with the Kremlin becoming smaller and smaller. This publication of mine was noticed and spread by the media with great interest).

In addition, I studied direction at the Theater Academy, filmed for anthropological expeditions, and worked as a video reporter at dangerous street rallies. I'm passionate about working with a screwdriver and a drill, as well as sleeping overnight in a tent in the depths of the wilderness. I've always had many hobbies and interests, and the most difficult thing for me is making them work together fluidly.

My morning typically starts with me giving my girlfriend a hug and a kiss, and feeding our two cats. Then I do what I call "the warmup of circumstances" — the time I devote to physical exercise. It varies depending on the weather, my wellbeing, and workload. It might be a two-hour run or strength training, or it could be basic lying down exercises during a depressive period.

After breakfast, I let the day sail freely, gently docking on islands of mutual agreement with others.

Ideally, during the day I:

- work on one of my jobs for a while (video editing, filming, illustrations, repairs);
- create or play some music;
- devote some time to a creative idea that has visited me;

- go outside (at least for a spell);
- spend some time with my wonderful girlfriend and converse with friends.

But not all days are perfect, and there are times when you have to work all day to have money to live on. There are also times when depression pushes you to the ground and you can't do anything but lie down.

My dream is to have the time and resources to play as much music as possible. I dream of republishing “A Book about Depression”. Unfortunately, it was only published once, and that edition sold out a long time ago; I only have one last badly wrinkled copy left. I'd like to have this comic book published abroad in several languages.

I plan to draw more books. One idea is an autobiographical comic book called “Matryoshki”: about depression embodied by several generations of women in my family.

I also very much hope to marry Sonya and spend our honeymoon in Amsterdam¹.

Recorded in January 2021

Update from Sasha from March 3, 2022

When the military operation in Ukraine started, I felt so terribly angry and helpless. All I could do was go out to the street to protest. I was detained in the center of Saint Petersburg along with dozens of other peaceful protesters.

At the police center they locked me in a cell for the whole night. We'd been held in horrible conditions: no food, no place to sleep, extremely dirty and putrid cells, the lights on. The officer didn't let us sleep all night, shouting and cursing at us.

¹ Same-sex marriage is illegal in Russia. The couples willing to get married officially go to other countries to do so. Meanwhile, same-sex marriage certificates issued abroad have no legal power in Russia.

P.S. If you are interested in Sasha's comics and could help publish them in any country — please reach out.

Comics in English:

<https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.1553345401552589&type=3>

Contacts:

[facebook.com/sasha.skochilenko](https://www.facebook.com/sasha.skochilenko)

sasha.verter@gmail.com

“Manic, I was shameless and fearless”, – Elena Rydkina, sex-educator

“I’ve had a woman-warrior complex since I was young, constantly pushing myself to great feats, to rough and risky experiments. I used to believe that being in a 9–10 out of 10 mood was “wow!”, moments worth living for.

Only years later I figured out that in periods of an upturn, I have to deliberately slow down instead of speeding up: take care of myself, take note of my needs, create a safe space around. I realized that the manic drive burns you out and is physically exhausting.

Thanks to psychotherapy, I saw that arousal, not only sexual, can stem “from the body” and “from the head”. In the second case, it rises uncontrollably and becomes tiring, uncomfortable, even physically unpleasant. And, in fact, this isn’t about sex. The desire to go off on an extreme adventure “this very second” often hides difficult emotions – fear or powerlessness”.



Elena Rydkina (29 years old), a sex coach and a facilitator in daring training programs, has made more than a notable contribution to sex education in Russia. She organized the country's first major conference Sexprosvet18+ and the first sizeable erotic party. Her approach to sex education can be considered revolutionary as she does everything she can to spread the values of sexual revolution.

I had been reading Elena's blog in which she candidly shared her discoveries and experiences for a long time, and when I saw her post about bipolarity, I decided to meet her in person.

Lena met me in her pajamas and immediately invited me to settle down in the coziest place in her apartment — on a spacious bed full of toys (no, not sex toys).

We recorded the interview in two sessions: in June 2019 when Elena first learned about her diagnosis and in August 2020 when she had already developed her own system of restraints and balances which allowed her to feel healthy and free.

Her story is about how mania helps to push the boundaries of what is possible while burning you out from within. This is a story of constant exploration of the world and oneself to which, perhaps, every creative person with a rebellious psyche is doomed.

Norilsk — Moscow — Los Angeles

At 16, I moved to the capital from the Arctic industrial city of Norilsk to study at the Higher School of Economics. In Moscow, my life became totally chaotic. For the first six months, I barely attended classes at the university, my schedule was completely irregular, there was a lot of drinking and partying.

I had periods of cosmic activity — weeks and months when I felt wonderful. I studied everything I stumbled upon, everything seemed wildly interesting. And then there was this weird sort of state like everything was covered by a dark veil. I didn't know what was happening. One moment everything was fine, and then I'd suddenly lose all interest. It seemed like time for me was going not linearly but in a spiral, constantly returning to the same state, everything on repeat.

For a long time, I treated these cycles as a given. I quickly understood that there were two people, if not more, living inside me simultaneously, and just got used to it. At about 19 years old, I formulated that as if for some reason, I was falling at that moment, and had to reach the bottom, just wait for the energy to start climbing on its own, then swim up, up to the surface. No need to show off and force yourself to do something. But in the back of my mind, I heard my dad's words: "stop moping!". That is, you have to be more serious, more responsible, "suck it up". But I couldn't help myself.

It wasn't that difficult to adjust to the instability of moods as a student. Besides, I wasn't studying very much, either: I was much more interested in new and exciting life experiences than scheduled lectures.

I started working right away — first, at a simple job doing deliveries and as a call-center operator, and then in my specialty: in a psychology laboratory and a biotech startup. But I didn't stay anywhere for long because as soon as I'd get interested, I'd just as quickly lose interest. I jumped from social anthropology to neuropsychology, from the history of the

Middle Ages to biotechnology. I started studying German, Spanish, French, and Italian. I was a student in a state-funded place, living first in a dormitory and then at my boyfriend's space, so my small earnings, along with my parents' support, kept me afloat.

It was much more difficult to sustain romantic relationships: one day in love, and the next, wanting nothing more than to crawl into my burrow and watch a serial.

My sexuality also changes with my moods: in hypomania, there is infinite energy, I want a lot of sex, experiments, different partners. Even three partners can be too few, while in periods of depression, one is already far too much. With a downturn, I begin to think that I would like some stability, a family, but the phase changes — and those desires evaporate.

It's wonderful that I manage to find understanding partners who know that I can be emotionally and sexually unavailable at times. Overall, consciousness and sincere communication with a partner is the best friend of not only people living with bipolar disorder, but any person in general.

At the same time, in my student years, I had the longest relationship I've had to this day: I lived with my boyfriend for three years and broke up with him countless times during.

Even now, I'm not that good at "serious" relationships. I'm constantly changing because of the mood cycles, yes, but also because of the constant search for myself, so relationships with specific people quickly lose their relevance. I can also be inconsistent in friendships. My surroundings and interests change rapidly. Only in the last couple of years have I started to move towards some sort of stability.

Sex and mania

After graduation, an incredibly interesting era in life started for me: my first serious job at an American biotech company and constant trips to international conferences. We

studied the aging process and ways of slowing it down — it was absolutely fascinating! At the same time, I was studying for my master’s degree in cognitive science. I had the opportunity to continue my trajectory in this field, while my dream was different.

I was captivated by sex education and digital technology, and, inspired by American educators, decided to look for a job in which I could realize this interest and started looking for jobs as a journalist covering sex-related topics through my acquaintances at first, but ended up finding something better.

I was introduced to the founder of the dating app Pure, and he offered me an unconventional job — to become a “sex evangelist” for the company. An evangelist is kind of an ambassador working in the field of technology. It’s a person who fully embraces the company’s values and conveys them through their own example.

My mission at Pure was to promote the values of the sexual revolution in Russia: freedom, liberation, and open communication about sex.

The work was as creative and free as could be. The company was situated abroad, and as a representative in Moscow, I mostly set my own tasks independently: deciding which events to attend, which and when to organize.

On the one hand, a life like this is no less than a dream for any creative person, but on the other, everything was simply too chaotic. The problem is that hypomania can’t last forever. And depression makes it completely impossible to do anything creative.

On a high, I’d start projects without knowing how much energy I would have a week or month later. It was far too often that after periods of hyperactivity, I’d completely disappear from the radar. It left me feeling terribly ashamed. I went on long business trips to amazing cities: San Francisco, New York, Los Angeles, while during them, I could barely bring myself to leave the house.

To be honest, I started doing sex education thanks to hypomania. During my highs, I was fearless and shameless. My self-esteem skyrocketed, making many things possible, and, most surprising of all, the world supported me.

This feeling always helped me push the borders. After all, this is the very thing I specialize in — doing what no one has dared before, being a pioneer.

That’s how my friends and I conceived and organized the Sexprosvet18+ conference. It was the first major event of this format in Russia: not professional or purely practical, but popular science.

Sexprosvet18+ (November 2015, translates from Russian as “sex education”) was Russia’s first popular science conference about sex that combined medical literacy, the psychology of intimate relationships, erotica, and discussions on socially important issues. The organizers set a goal of starting an open, honest, and competent conversation about sex and sexuality in society.

Over time, the conference has grown into a large educational project in Russia and its neighboring countries, organizing regular lectures and workshops on various aspects of sex, sexuality, and relationships.

I’ve invented quite a lot of new things for Russia in this sphere. For example, I’ve given lectures about SexTech (technology and innovation in the sexual arena) at professional conferences. I’ve observed numerous amusing and definitively wild situations seeing as the majority of Russians are by no means accustomed to discussing sex openly, especially at “serious” business meetings. For instance, when I spoke at the Saint Petersburg Internet Conference in 2016, about a third of the listeners simply left the hall with indignant expressions. One man in his 40’s just burst into Homeric laughter when all I was talking about was how new contraceptives were being developed in laboratories in various countries.

Some of my ventures may seem absolutely mad from an outside perspective. For several years, I'd been into erotic domination and had occasionally worked as a professional dominatrix. I developed a workshop which involved playing with men anally on live models — it was the first workshop of its kind in Russia, and it looked like a small educational orgy. The training quickly became popular. I was even called “the Russian prostate queen”. I once gave a master class on a male model in front of a hundred spectators. It was at the first Kinky Party (then called Pop Porn Party), again, the first big erotic party in Russia. I managed to hold similar training sessions in Ukraine and even Los Angeles, it was a blast!

At the parties, I introduced the format “Indecent Stories” in which people go on stage and publicly talk about their erotic and sexual experiences.

BDSM is a subculture uniting the people who engage in sexual practices such as bondage, sadism, masochism, dominance, and submission. In a couple, the roles are typically divided into the dominant (the one who has power) and the submissive (the one who submits).

Female domination (or femdom) is a format of BDSM erotic games in which a woman (the dominatrix, or mistress) dominates another person physically and psychologically: orders, submits, demands to fulfill her fantasies, and punishes them for disobedience.

Once I participated in popular TV show “The Bachelor” and gave the bachelor, looking for an ideal woman, a sex doll as a gift. On this sexist and quite toxic show, I tried to promote feminist ideals. It was difficult, especially because I decided to take part in the show in a state of hypomania, though filming was underway already during a period of depression.

Overall, my hypomanias have been quite productive — the excess energy has been channeled into creativity and work, albeit of an unconventional sort.

There were some rather weird experiments. One time on the rise, I became fascinated by the Buddhist idea of the

emptiness, or ultimate mutability of consciousness. For some time, I was diligently going over all attitudes and ideas about myself in my mind. As soon as a week later, I already had some difficulty physically recognizing myself — a full blown dissociation.

At that time, I learned from my friend, a Jungian psychoanalyst, about the female archetypes of Eve (devoted and caring wife and mother) and Lilith (free, creative, and sexual). I was impressed by how much in my life could be explained by this pair of archetypes to such an extent that I decided to balance them through a ritual: on the one side of my head, I shaved a temple, fashioned a Valkyrie braid, and pierced the upper part of the ear and the nose. The other side I left feminine to symbolize Eve.

There were times when I borrowed a lot of money to abruptly fly across the ocean for a handsome man. At the time, of course, it seemed like the most clever idea in the world. Once I even raised money for two trips to the States with a Facebook post.

I earned quite a lot of money that year and planned to travel all summer. But I ended up spending everything quickly. I had a ticket to a sex educators' camp near Washington in my hands, but no money for the flight! A few days before the event, I wrote a post about it. Instantly, a subscriber showed up who bought me the ticket pro bono. Another subscriber paid for my next trip to Los Angeles. This story was even covered in the press and many people were subsequently offended by my audacity. But at that time, I had a true sense that anything was possible.

An unquiet mind and panic

There were a few wake-up calls that eventually got me thinking that my mood swings weren't just a feature of my character.

The first happened at the age of 22 when I suddenly fainted in a club. A neurologist then told me that I had high

cortical excitability and needed to slow down; less alcohol, less loud music, calm walks and yoga, which sounded terribly boring! But I got seriously scared for my health and decided to lead a more steady life and started doing yoga, among other things and it helped for some time.

In the summer and autumn of 2018, I went through a streak of difficult events: the suicide of my friend, an especially painful breakup with my boyfriend, the death of a good acquaintance. I was traveling constantly that year, and my emotions were tossing me up and down, from sorrow and sadness to joy and back again. Traveling took a lot out of me, and when I returned home, I decided to stay in Moscow all winter and take care of myself.

At first, I was calm and happy, sure that I would recover soon. But during the New Year holidays, I plummeted like a rock. I spent a lot of time alone, there was no work, and it turned out to be unbearable. I felt sick, overwhelmed with panic in one moment and gnawed at from the inside by a vast gray sorrow in the other. I clutched my head wondering what I was doing wrong

And as soon as the holidays ended, everything immediately came back to life, the kaleidoscope of projects and parties began, and I was spun around as if on a merry-go-round. After a couple of weeks of this regimen, I had no idea what was happening to me, all control was lost — I was just waiting for it to break me. It was as if I was tied to a carriage rushing at full speed into the abyss.

A year prior, in January 2017, on a trip to Vienna, I got my hands on Kay Jamison's book "An Unquiet Mind". Right as I was reading, I had a panic attack: the sensation of recognizing what the author was experiencing was nightmarish. I was numb, unable to do the simplest things. My boyfriend had to lead me to the airport holding hand and show my passport to customs. I was torn into pieces by the unbearability of being in my own body — at that moment, I just wanted to self-destruct.

I was really frightened and told my therapist about this event. We started working with the shadow emotions I was hiding from myself; shame, fear, and anger. It helped to some extent.

It was only a year later that I started seriously considering getting psychiatric treatment. At that time, I had a boyfriend who was being treated for bipolar disorder. He occasionally joked that I was just like him.

Once, I shared my fear with him that I couldn't build anything reliable in my life: after each cycle of moods, it was as if all my achievements zeroed out, I'd come back to square one over and over again, and it was wearing me out.

My boyfriend replied: "I think you really should see a psychiatrist."

I had a terrible night after that conversation, all kinds of thoughts were crawling into my head. On the one hand, I understood that if I decided to get treatment, I would probably get additional instruments for managing my life. There was also the thought that having a mental disorder was even "spicy", after all, I've always strived for all things considered to be out of the ordinary. I have a progressive friend group, it's not a stigma for my friends.

On the other hand, I was above all terrified of being locked up in an asylum.

Sometimes in altered states of consciousness, on psychedelics or marijuana, a strange sensation would come over me: as if I was getting locked up inside my own head. The outside world was becoming unreal and distant, one more bit, and the connection with it would be severed and I would end up trapped inside myself forever. The people around kept reassuring me that everything was alright, but I just couldn't get in touch with them. In moments like this, I started to fear that those around me would realize I was inadequate and send me to a "psycho ward".

The psychiatrist, when I finally did get to her, allayed many of my fears. I learned that I wouldn't be sent to the hospital against my will, that it could only happen if I tried to harm myself or those around me.

The funny thing is that I first attended the appointment in hypomania, right after presenting a lecture on polyamory and giving an interview to a popular publisher — agitated as hell, with frantic eyes. The doctor said this was a rare thing to happen — bipolar people most often come to the doctor when depressed.

I was prescribed a mood stabilizer and an antipsychotic. I was messed up at first, but after a couple of weeks, my condition started evening out. The antipsychotic made me sleep for 10–11 hours a night, but that was okay because the rest of the time my consciousness was clear and my condition was productive.

I immediately asked the doctor when I would be able to stop taking pills. She answered that if I created a correct lifestyle and mastered mindfulness practices, it could become possible in a year.

Finding a way to balance

(recorded in August 2020)

I spoke up about bipolar disorder openly from the very start — in fact, the same as about everything that was happening to me. I can't say that the diagnosis changed my life radically. I don't define myself through the illness and don't consider myself a "sick" person. Bipolar disorder is, undoubtedly, a part of me and not a defect that needs to be kept in secret or fixed by any means necessary.

My friends in Moscow and abroad have always been very supportive, we often discuss mental health, so I didn't and don't shock them with my openness.

It turned out to be the most difficult to tell my parents about the diagnosis. They definitely got scared and anxiously

kept an eye on my condition while I was staying at their place, trying not to upset me, though overall, they supported me. We even tried to find out who I got this “inheritance” from, although we never found the answer.

For the first few months, I kept a tight rein on my daily regimen and my blood sugar levels, eliminating alcohol and caffeine, and developed many self-care practices. But these restraints ended up being too much. My adherence to medication lasted for six months until the first big temptation.

I went to the Burning Man event and decided to take a break from the rules until my return to Moscow. Hello once again, old friend, irregular routine, psychoactive substances, an excess of sensory experiences — all thunderously loud, lightning bright, and crazy! After the night trip, morning, day and night got mixed up, I couldn’t decide or understand when to take my pills (that needed to be taken by the hour), so I didn’t take them at all.

In fact, I didn’t like how I was feeling on meds: as if my head was in a vise-grip, I was living, but not to my fullest potential, feeling, but not really. I didn’t go back to the psychiatrist. It wasn’t easy for me by any means, but I was so alive!

I decided to search for an alternative way to balance and started a fascinating process of research and self-exploration. I can share some preliminary results.

I’ve accepted the fact that I was given a sensitive psyche. It is like an expensive, fragile violin that requires careful handling. My task is to learn how to take care of that: by working with my emotions, my consciousness, changing my lifestyle and managing stress.

I’ve come to terms with the fact that my mood can’t be stable all the time, or rather steadily elevated, as I’ve dreamed at times. Being sad and feeling down is sometimes normal, besides, there also are the female hormonal cycles that there’s no point in fighting against. What’s important is to avoid extremes — knowing your limits and not crossing them. And if you do cross, double up on taking care of yourself afterward.

I'm learning to be more attentive to my physical and emotional state, learning step by step the skills that help me slow the ups and downs at their beginnings before they develop into full-blown depression or mania.

A great achievement for me has been understanding that extreme uplift states are actually not as fantastic as I'd thought before. I was used to believing that a 9–10 points out of a 10 mood — wow, these are the moments worth living for. But having listened to my feelings more closely, I've realized that the maniacal drive burns you out and is physically exhausting.

Thanks to psychotherapy (I've been in personal therapy since 2017 and training as a Gestalt therapist since 2018), I saw that arousal, not only sexual, can stem “from the body” and “from the head”. In the latter case, it rises uncontrollably and becomes tiring, uncomfortable, even physically unpleasant. And, in fact, this isn't about sex. The desire to go off on an extreme adventure “*this very second*” often hides difficult emotions — for example, fear or powerlessness.

I used to have this rule: when in doubt, fall in love and find a sexual adventure! I would escape from my troubles into sex and satisfy many different needs with it — from relieving anxiety to achieving self-actualization. Now the main function of sex in my life is deepening contact and having both physical and emotional intimacy with a specific person.

I've had a woman-warrior complex since I was young — I constantly pushed myself to great feats, to rough and risky experiments. But what I in fact need to do in the periods of an upturn is not speed up further but consciously slow down: take care of myself, take note of my needs, create a safe space around myself.

The embodiment approach that focuses on improving your contact with the body really suited me: I'm learning to calm down and ground myself through meditation and physical exercise. I found great support in Shaolin Kung Fu and Taoist practices, as well as in meditation. At first, I was meditating

for an hour a day setting myself tasks, for example, “to find peace”. With the help of this practice, I manage to put myself to sleep even in hypomania.

I’ve discovered alternative ways to relieve arousal “from the head”. For example, authentic movement to music — allowing your body to move in the rhythm of the music and emotions in whatever way it wishes to. You can sing, roar, just scream it out. It’s crucial to find techniques that work in advance in order to have them in your arsenal for critical moments.

I’ve found out that one’s mental state is strongly influenced by nutrition, especially sugar and caffeine intake. To really figure this out, I decided to take a course in nutrition and then started studying to become a health coach.

I gave up excess coffee and tea (I don’t drink them more than once a week now) because caffeine prevents me from falling asleep in time. I’ve almost stopped drinking alcohol, but actually I don’t usually need it, nor any other psychoactive substances: my sensory perception is already heightened without any doping. I realized that when I take psychotropic substances, they often drive me not only into mania but also into depression.

I’m learning to understand what my body is actually telling me. For example, I noticed that instead of eating sweet things when I really crave them, it’s enough to just get out into the fresh air!

Back in 2018, I realized that my life lacked a regime and that sleep was critically important since my worst deterioration started after a sleepless night on New Year’s Eve. I conducted an experiment: for a month, I looked for the optimal regime, adjusting my sleeping and eating schedule, creating bedtime and wake-up rituals. Now, even if I want to party until morning, I go to sleep so as not to disturb my psyche.

Two hours before bed, I try to turn on the airplane mode on my phone, relax, put on a special playlist, sometimes dance slowly, then read novels instead of using gadgets. I sleep for as

long as my body asks. For the mornings, I've also invented a ritual for a smooth immersion into "work mode".

I was deeply impressed by the UN World Happiness study¹ that spoke about the link between the constant use of gadgets and depressive states and even suicidal ideation. People are often sleeping worse because of smartphones or other screens: the bright light and excessive information flow at night heavily stimulate the brain.

So far, I've been able to balance my moods: there have been no long lows or extreme highs recently.

When dreams come true

My biggest dream has always been to live differently. And, indeed, I've succeeded in that.

At 25, I ended up in Los Angeles with the man I loved, we were both professional dominants. He wanted to marry me. I learned from the world's best professionals in BDSM. I accumulated a client base, successfully held my first training session, and started gathering a team for a sex education project in virtual reality. My boyfriend and I had a wonderful polyamorous friend group with the hottest sex parties. Seemingly, I'd found my niche — as perverted as can be, here it was, the unicorn world I could only have dreamed of!

What can I say? I left Los Angeles and never came back as I understood that this wasn't what I wanted.

My last attempt to make this dream come true was "The City of Sexual Freedom" in the Caribbean. I agreed to this job, although I didn't actually want it anymore. After a while, I realized that no, it wasn't right either, so I moved on.

¹The World Happiness Report by Sustainable Development Solutions Network, <https://worldhappiness.report/ed/2019>

Caribbean Fancy is a hotel complex in the Dominican Republic specializing in sex parties. It positions itself as a place for complete freedom in sexual self-expression.

I no longer have training sessions with live models and don't take clients for erotic domination, although there are many offers consistently coming in. Psychotherapy seriously changed my perception of sexuality, these things have become more intimate for me. Overall, I have grown calmer with age. It seems that I've had more than enough different sexual experiences and besides, I've started to understand my own desires better.

Thanks to studying psychology and healthy lifestyle (for each body), my interests have expanded beyond sex education. I still do sex coaching, but more and more move away from exclusively sexual practices to pleasure in a broader sense. In other words, I now help women, men and couples learn how to get pleasure from themselves, their bodies, their lives; to find the exact things that suit them in their relationships.

I have a feeling that I'll live a few more lives and do many different things. And I know that this path isn't going to be easy because of my rebellious psyche. But I have a brave heart and believe I'll be able to accept my life the way it is, the way it might be, and use any experience for the good of the world and myself.

“To become a businessman in Russia, you have to be insane”, – Alexander Donskoy, showman and entrepreneur

“I officially announced that I would run for president of Russia in 2008. My statement had an explosive effect in political circles.

And although everyone knew perfectly well I had no chance of winning this election, they decided to use me as an example of demonstrative retribution for others who fell “out of line”. They fabricated several criminal cases against me and sent me to prison.

...When I remember the events of those months, I see the sun that disappeared at one moment as if devoured by the crocodile from the well-known Russian children’s poem. I ended up in not just one prison but two. One was a real detention center with a damp and dirty cell, disgusting stinking mattresses, vomit from spoiled food, constant surveillance and humiliation. No one but me saw the other prison. But it was even worse than the first. It was my depression.

I began to think that I’d been in prison for a long time – not a month or two, but a year, three, five, ten years... At times, a thought crept into my head: “What if I’ve always been only here? What if my entire life in freedom – the business empire, the election victory, the mayoral post – has been nothing but a hallucination? What if I’m actually still that young boy and this is the same exact room my parents used to lock me in to keep me out of the way?”



Former Mayor of Arkhangelsk city in Northern Russia, Alexander Donskoy (50 years old) attempted to run for president on a wave of euphoria years before Kanye West experienced and exhibited something similar¹. Unlike the rapper, he was punished for his audacity with a prison sentence. He didn't despair, however, instead continuing his career in a brand-new sphere – the entertainment industry. Alexander founded Russia's first museum of erotica, organizing numerous and scandalous performances.

¹ In July 2020, rap star Kanye West filed paperwork to register as a presidential candidate for The Birthday Party he invented. However, he soon withdrew from the race. West's family claimed that Kanye's activity at the time was caused by a manic episode of bipolar disorder the musician suffers from.

In 2018, Donskoy publicly announced that the reason behind many of his successes, failures, and oddities was the bipolar disorder he had lived with since childhood. The entrepreneur published an entire book¹ about it — something between a confessional and educational material.

Of course, I became interested in knowing the details of the first “coming out” regarding a mental disorder in the business sphere. I texted Alexander on Facebook and he immediately agreed to meet me in his office in a high-rise in the Moscow City Business Center.

I saw a middle-aged man, slightly sad, in a brand-name tracksuit, looking neither like a flamboyant showman nor the energetic politician who often appeared in the news.

Alexander talked about how periods of euphoria and depression can produce brilliant and failed business ideas, make or break relationships, and can ultimately kill if you don’t work hard enough to curb them.

¹ Book “Mood Swings. From Depression to Euphoria” by Alexander Donskoy, 2018 (in Russian).

<https://www.litres.ru/aleksandr-viktorovich-donskoy/perepady-nastroeniya-ot-depressii-k-eyforii/>

The self-help book

When I started to dictate the future book to my assistant, I said: if it saves at least one single person, then all of this won't have been in vain. A month later I called her back and added: if it saves me at least, it's already something. I feel like it's really stupid to commit suicide when you're writing a book about bipolar disorder. Even after that, it's stupid. So it's a self-help book first and foremost. I actually didn't know exactly what its purpose was, I just wanted to talk about everything I'd experienced.

I don't regret that I have bipolar disorder. After all, the question is really about what I might have been without it.

I was born in 1970 in an industrial neighborhood of Arkhangelsk populated by workers employed at the local pulp and paper mill. It had wooden barracks left after World War II, a river and a cabbage field.

My stepfather worked as a pulp maker at that same mill. He didn't even try to get along with me. Most of the time, my sister and I were locked in our room so we wouldn't get in the way. However, if I had enough time to do something wrong, punishment came quickly. My mother would hit me with the hose from our old washing machine. They'd also tie me to the radiator and leave me for hours. It was the most excruciating execution. It didn't seem to hurt but it was so humiliating. I felt completely helpless and unwanted.

Excerpt from the book "Mood Swings"

When I started my career in Arkhangelsk, I was laying boards, working as a carpenter and a watchman. Maybe if I'd been a normal person, I'd have stayed there. Honestly, it's sad to think about it. And then, I wasn't even able to keep that kind of job permanently; Soon I'd be fired for absenteeism and bouts of idleness.

To feed my family, I tried various jobs. From morning till dusk, I sawed wooden planks to be used to fence dachas. I started peddling cigarettes: buying them from sailors and reselling them to corner stores. Then I started traveling to Moscow to buy goods. The sales channels grew. I was supplying wares to the city's markets, stands and kiosks.

During that time, I went through so much that it's hard to put into words. I was screwed over by my partners, beaten by criminal gangs, ripped off by my own salespeople. It wasn't smooth sailing, to say the least. But this path led me to 1994, when I registered my first company. In fact, it was one single kiosk. Soon thereafter, I had 18 kiosks. By 2003, I had 18 stores across the region. My trading firm named Season employed 800 people.

from the "Mood Swings"

From an election campaign to prison

There were megatons of energy boiling inside me. I honestly thought it was perfectly normal to work hard, get little sleep, and manage so much.

The more successful I got, the less willing I was to stop at what I had. My acquaintances pleaded with me: "Sasha, slow down! Sasha, get some rest, why do you need new projects? Isn't what you have already enough?" And I just thought: "Are you out of your mind? What have I accomplished? Well, I'm a somewhat successful person now. But this is by the standards of Arkhangelsk! Merely Arkhangelsk, far from the largest or most promising city on the planet! But there are other cities...for example.... the expanse of the country. And the scale of the world! No one knows anything about me there!"

In 2003, I figured that my firm Season had hit the peak of its development. I was bored to death. I wanted to try something new to experience that wonderful feeling of the unknown once again.

At the same time, I realized that my dream was to become the mayor of Arkhangelsk. It seemed to me that it would be a fitting end to my career in my hometown — to move from the barracks

in that industrial community to the chair of mayor. Upon learning of my plans, my family and friends thought I was completely crazy. I ran my election campaign myself.

I sometimes think I'm truly blessed. That a higher power is saving me somehow, although I don't believe in God. I had more than enough opportunities to get myself into the deep end. I'd planned to spend \$100,000 on the campaign but ended up spending over a million. I couldn't stop and I wasn't even counting, just taking out loans.

*There were many moments during the campaign when everything could've gone awry. At one point my competitors put out a paper saying I was a f***ot [homosexual] and wrote everywhere possible that I'd created a gay cult. But, once again, we were lucky: we had a wonderful team, the expenses paid off. In the elections that took place on March 13, 2005, I won with 38.65% of the vote and at 35 years old, I became the youngest mayor in the country.*

At that time, I felt splendid. It was a magnificent feeling — as if I'd had a system upgrade and qualitatively been granted a new level of abilities. Instead of 8 hours per day, I only slept for 2–3. I didn't want to waste precious time on sleep. After all, a unique opportunity might present itself, and I'd miss it all, just sleep through it. I realize now that I had been living in a state of euphoria for years.

I believed that creation itself was on my side. It was as if an invisible angel was standing over my shoulders whispering: "Everything will work out, you just do it. Do whatever comes into your head. I will take care of the rest".

In 2006 I officially announced that I would run for president of Russia in 2008. My statement had an explosive effect in political circles.

It was way later that I realized what my mistake had been. You can't just go and announce that you're running for president. You have to first get the support of the authorities, get an official waiver from them. Most probably, they'll let you be a "spoiler candidate" — a person luring votes from real opponents. Spoilers

are necessary in any election campaign. They help to simulate democracy and choice in the country.

And, although everyone knew perfectly well I had no chance of winning the election, they decided to use me as a demonstrative retribution for others who fell “out of line”. They fabricated several criminal cases against me and sent me to prison.

Soon after Alexander Donskoy’s announcement on running for president, he was flooded with inspections. In December 2006, a criminal case was opened against Donskoy, accusing him of using a forged educational diploma. In 2007, two more cases emerged: one charge of illegal participation in entrepreneurial activity and another of abuse of power. On August 1, 2007, the head of Arkhangelsk was arrested for seven months and then sentenced to three years of suspended imprisonment.

When I recall the events of these months, I see the sun that disappeared at one moment as if devoured by the crocodile from the well-known children’s poem. I ended up in not just one prison but two. One was a real detention center with a dirty damp cell, disgusting stinking mattresses, vomit from spoiled food, constant surveillance, and humiliation. No one but me saw the other prison. But it was even worse than the first. It was my depression.

I began to think that I had been in prison for a long time — not a month or two, but a year, three, five years, ten... At times, a thought crept into my head: “What if I’ve always and only been here? What if my entire life in freedom — the business empire, the election victory, the mayoral post — is nothing but a hallucination? What if I’m actually still a young boy and this is the same exact room my parents used to lock me in to keep me out of the way?”

From “Mood Swings”

Pushing back from the bottom

During one of the toughest periods of my life, after I was released from the detention center, my passion for coaching helped me survive. I got out of politics and found myself with no money at all. I spent thousands of dollars — first on useless crap and then on lawyers. Few people believed that things were that bad for me then. They thought that because I used to be a mayor, I'd stolen tons of money.

I complained to a fellow coach: “I guess I’m at rock bottom, I can’t even afford to buy my kids food.” She replied: “It isn’t rock bottom yet if you have nothing to push back from”. And, indeed, I soon began to find my way up again.

I started consulting people on business affairs and figured that I could do something. When you are trying to help others, you drag yourself out, too, you resurrect your self-esteem. I listened to how others were getting out of difficult situations and learned from them. Based on that experience, I wrote my first book “Sell Yourself. In Business, Politics and Personal Life” [6].

Later, I understood that the popular coaching method “push up from the bottom” doesn’t work with depression. You can’t drag yourself out of a swamp like Baron Munchausen from a popular fairy tale. You always need external help. But when I feel bad, it’s difficult for me to turn to others, hard to admit that I need something. I start hiding from others, locking myself up in loneliness. My friends volunteered to help me but I literally couldn’t even answer the phone. It might be much tougher for men to admit they need help.

When I read stories of other people with bipolar disorder who had nowhere to expect help from, no one to delegate tasks to, I ponder: “What would I do in their circumstances? Maybe I would’ve already hanged myself by now”.

On the upside, I'm incredibly capable and feel that I've done a huge amount of excellent and useful things. It also happens that you do something useless and suddenly get a brilliant result. In business, when you're generally in the black, it means everything's going well. Although I often worry that I haven't done anything fundamentally new lately. I have this relentless desire for each and every day to bring about a breakthrough.

In euphoria, I perceive the world differently compared to how other people see and hear it. I see ideas where others can not. I can do things that others can't. I come up with brilliant and "crazy" projects.

It was thanks to that euphoria that in the summer of 2011, I opened Russia's first museum of erotica, G-Spot, on the central Arbat street in Moscow. The buzz around the museum was so great that people lined up to see it for themselves. At about the same time, I saw an installation at the Museum of Modern Art in Finland and thought that if I enlarged it to 60 meters, I could make a maze without walls. Thus, the Ribbon Labyrinth was born. And then we opened it in 10 Russian cities.

from "Mood Swings"

In 2011, Alexander Donskoy founded the Big-Funny entertainment corporation. It comprises over a hundred museums and attractions for children and adults in Russia, the USA and Europe. Among them are the G-Spot Erotic Art Museum, The Mirror Maze, The Labyrinth of Fear, Inside a Human Body and many others¹.

In a state of euphoria, I designed and opened the Museum of Power in Saint Petersburg. The exposition of paintings turned out spectacular: the head of the Russian Orthodox church Patriarch Kirill with tattoos, President Vladimir Putin and Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev in women's clothing. We couldn't resist devoting a separate painting to deputy Vitaly Milonov. Of course,

¹ <https://bigcreative.fun/>

we depicted him accompanied by gay men... Milonov honored our exhibition with his personal presence, after which the museum was closed and sealed. We were only open for 12 days.

from "Mood Swings"

Vitaly Milonov is a member of the Russian State Duma known for his conservative and homophobic policies. His most famous initiative is the Law against the propaganda of homosexuality among minors (2013). The implementation of this law provoked a nationwide spike in homophobia and oppression of sexual minorities¹.

But things are still far from rosy. For example, what did I do in my last "up" period? I got into a mess of a fight with my son who is also my business partner, blocked my 13-year-old daughter on my phone, flipped off my sister, broke up with my wife, was about to leave for another woman, and rashly got involved in two projects...

I've done a lot of strange things in my life to suit my mood. For example, I recorded a video: "Afraid to shit yourself in public — walk down Arbat in your shitty underwear!" I received a myriad of negative reactions, my daughter was even told at school that her dad was an idiot. And I was convinced at the time that it was the coolest thing.

One day, in the heat of the moment, I posted a video saying that the next president of Russia would be gay. I ended up broadcasting a story on national TV about being gay and planning to run for president again.

¹ Human Rights Watch on Russian "Gay propaganda" law consequences: <https://www.hrw.org/report/2018/12/11/no-support/russias-gay-propaganda-law-imperils-lgbt-youth>²

² <https://ridero.ru/link/uCRwSD9ZI038jD>

Not a while ago, I also recorded a stupid song called “Fuck Me”. My ex-wife warned me that it wouldn’t do me any good and I’d only be opening a can of worms. Well, I really did¹.

Also, when I was on vacation, I bought myself a pile of all sorts of things, a thousand euros total, and then walked down the street just giving those things away to people.

But all those useless things I couldn’t help but do, otherwise, they would’ve gotten stuck in my head, buzzing constantly. A moment arrives when I can simply no longer stop. I think it’s typical for bipolar people: better to do and regret than not to do and regret anyway. Many of my ideas are dangerous and risky but they are captivating, in those moments you truly feel alive.

It’s still a huge problem for me to do something continuously, to finish big chunks of work. Because of my poor self-organization, I don’t even know for certain if there are any patterns in my mood changes.

But the worst thing is when there are no ideas in my head, no desires, I start thinking that my life has ended. The only things left are problems to resolve.

I recently decided to launch a new nightclub in Saint Petersburg, gathered a team, and announced that Paris Hilton would be at the opening. And then the upturn ended and I pretty much folded everything I’d started. When you’re depressed, you begin to realize what you’ve gotten yourself into, and you don’t know which endeavors are going to bring you profit and which ones will only lead to significant losses. It really bothers me that I’m making increasingly more mistakes as the years go by.

Suicidal thoughts are also frequent, for instance, just yesterday. I have a board in my room and I wrote on it: “What am

¹ Alexander’s performances https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCj49Vu8p-ZIDFrA5hIIU_EMA/featured²

² <https://ridero.ru/link/WUJwWg6L39zIzn>

I living for?”. I tried to find the answer for two months. And then depression passes and everything becomes wonderful again, the issue resolves itself.

I still struggle with the question — when am I normal at all? Depression is an abnormal state, so is mania, then what is left?

It's OK to be depressed and not OK to look happy

At first, I was speaking to psychologists. They asked me, “What’s making you nervous?” And I couldn’t answer it, the color just drained from my face.

Then, I started seeing psychiatrists. I had appointments with various doctors, all of them said different things. One doctor had a hypothesis that it was a personality disorder, another one — that I had attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). They scanned my brain several times, even suggesting that I should be exposed to magnetic waves with a special device.

There was also an Ayurvedic doctor, a Hindu, who advised me to just accept the fact that I had that sort of character.

One doctor said the opposite: “You have to be put in a hospital immediately, outpatient treatment won’t help you.” I got really scared — both by the psychiatric hospital and by the prospect of taking medication for the rest of my life. They tried to put me into a private clinic but I quickly escaped. It felt like the doctors had just decided to make money off of me: the longer you are hospitalized, the more money they get. There are enough problems with commercial healthcare: as soon as the clinic realizes that you have money, they’ll start eliciting it from you with no end.

I still pray that I’ll find a miraculous way to make it go away but I already understand that it’s permanent. Nonetheless, I hope to go into remission in some time and function without meds.

Luckily, my loved ones are supportive. My wife has read several books about bipolar disorder and even talked to my psychiatrist. She helps me keep a diary, reminds me about the pills (I can't even remember their names right now), and comforts me by saying that my depression is temporary and it will pass.

But when I tell my colleagues about my problems, they typically don't understand what I'm talking about at all. You can't explain that there simply are ups and downs without any external reason. They constantly ask: "What's wrong with you?" Even my wife, though she understands a lot, sometimes asks why I'm sad.

I recently called a friend of mine:

— I feel like crap.

— And where are you?

— In Amsterdam.

— If I were in Amsterdam, I'd feel great!

I honestly have tried to physically run away from depression a few times — to Amsterdam, to Egypt, to the Maldives, anywhere. But it doesn't work.

There's a weird and incongruent attitude to depression in Russia. If a person is constantly sad, it isn't considered an illness. Given our mentality, there are way more questions for people who are happy, smiling ear to ear. Those are the people thought of as insane. And if you confess that you feel miserable, they answer: "Woe from wit! Don't make things up!" or "Stop working yourself up!" or "It all comes from idleness. Go and lug some heavy sacks, you'll cheer up right away!". With such heartfelt support, many people suffering from depression don't even realize they have it.

from "Mood Swings"

By now I've only once met someone who reacted to my bipolar disorder positively: "Wow, how interesting, what's that like?". The rest responded saying something along the lines

of: “Well, that’s nothing, don’t worry about it”. Or another option: “But this is real life, doing so much! I wish I could live like that.”

I feel like for most of our compatriots, no matter if it’s schizophrenia or bipolar disorder, everything sounds about the same — you are a psycho, you are weird, it’s best to keep a distance.

Alexander’s words are supported by the reaction to his autobiography in his hometown. The news agency “Echo of the North” published the following note:

“All of this is nonsense. What is actually happening is that law enforcement agencies are currently investigating the allocation of land plots in Arkhangelsk during the period of Donskoy’s rule. How do you get away from investigative questions? Simple. Declare yourself insane. That’s how far one can go trying to avoid prison”.

Business and insanity

Speaking of Russian entrepreneurs, I think most of them are somewhat f***ed up [insane]. A normal person would walk the line, fit into the system. Most people are willing to become “cogs in the machine” but in business, you have to come up with something of your own every day.

I can picture these people well because at one time I was consulting them as a coach. Everyone has some sort of issue. One man came to me, paid a thousand dollars for the session, and started complaining about his depression. It seemed that he had everything: a wife, a lover, houses in Russia and Asia. He ended up taking art classes and started painting pictures.

The world is chaotic and unmanageable. But some people get by via some type of intuition, they find their place. I believe mental disorders are very common among businessmen and politicians, people just don’t talk about it.

They don’t say anything because they are afraid of being diagnosed, of being officially recognized as insane. If a person

in business in Russia says they have a mental disorder, their competitors shout: “So-and-so is sick in the head, goodbye!”. You get the same effect when you openly say you’re gay, I checked!

I think that in the West, coming out about mental illness or anything could give people something, but in Russia, you only find trouble. So it’s worth speaking up if you just want to share what’s bothering you and stop pretending that everything is always fine.

Recorded in September 2018

“I can give the impression of a very functional person, but that’s an illusion”, – Sasha Starost, modern artist

“The cops saw a really odd group, very young in comparison to the others, with strange posters like “I know my diagnosis, and you?” and “I’m not ashamed”. I remember them looking through our posters like ‘there’s nothing clearly political here’. But they decided to get rid of us just in case.

It was a dangerous moment. I tend to struggle with controlling my impulses at times, so when the cops started pushing and pulling us, grabbing me by the hand, I started fighting back. I was furious, I saw cops literally throwing our guys to the ground and tearing our posters. We all were escorted to the police ‘party vans’.

For most of the participants this was their very first clash with police. And it was brutal. We had several people with cerebral palsy in the crowd, and a couple of people with severe anxiety. What really astounded me however was the reaction of our participants – they weren’t scared off by this unfortunate incident and the majority returned to work with us on the festivals that we organized later.”



Sasha (32 years) is a modern artist and the co-founder of Psychoactive, the first self-advocacy movement in Russia for people with psychiatric conditions. To draw attention to the stigma surrounding mental illness she organized Mad Pride in Moscow and flagellated herself in public.

I've known of Sasha since her bright appearance on a Public Chamber roundtable on mental health stigma to which she had not been not invited: a slim woman in black breaking into an official event with a statement "I know what stigma is because I have paranoid schizophrenia".

Since that day three years ago we have met many times during public events devoted to our common topic of interest.

Psychoactive

Psychoactive¹ is an activist movement, a platform for people with different psychiatric conditions that I started with Katrin Nenasheva, an action and performance artist. Our mission is self-advocacy, which means speaking up for ourselves and our interests, about the range of challenges implied by living with mental disorders.

Self-advocacy is a name used for and within civil rights movements and mutual aid networks for disabled people. The term arose in the broader civil rights movements of the 1960's and 1970's, and is part of the disability rights movement.

Katrin Nenasheva² is a young actionist who devotes her bold performances to the problems of the most vulnerable: men and women in mental institutions, suicidal teens, women in prison, and victims of war. A series of her actions were designed to attract attention to those locked up for years in psychoneurological facilities.

One of her actions was called Punishment and was devoted to children from orphanages sent to psychiatric hospitals as a form of punishment for disobedience. During three weeks Katrin walked around Moscow carrying a metal hospital bed on her back.

Originally I never planned to be an activist per se, I wanted to be a musician. Back in the day I created online streams on psychiatry, its history and philosophy. I noticed that the majority of people primarily focused on their personal experience with mental illness, but I never particularly enjoyed talking

¹ Psychoactive movement

<https://www.facebook.com/psychoaktivno/>

<https://www.instagram.com/psychoaktivno/>

² Katrin Nenasheva performances

https://www.huffpost.com/entry/russian-artist-protest-orphan-mistreatment_n_577fc592e4b0c590f7e90839

about myself that much. So I centered on psychiatric history and culture.

Katrin saw my streams and contacted me with a suggestion that I take part in a performance of hers called “I’m on fire”. This was supposed to be a collective project by a group of artists dedicated to exploring professional burnout among activists. This turned out to be my first solo performance.

Mercy for the Fallen

My first work was called Mercy for the Fallen¹.

On stage, I performed an act of self-flagellation. I repeated the contrite words and movements of the Middle Ages flagellants, who vigorously whipped themselves, loudly confessing their sins in public displays of penance.

This was heavily based on French philosopher Michel Foucault’s idea of earned empathy and self-inflicted stigma. Foucault, an author of the “Madness and Civilization”, suggested that so-called “mad” have historically inherited the societal space of leprotics. Great suffering legitimizes both of these groups, giving birth to the idea of a “perfect victim”, one that is humble, in obvious pain and willing to submit to whatever rules society creates for those of his condition.

My self-flagellation was a symbolic demonstration of the need to suffer to earn the acceptance of society, and to suffer properly. Unfortunately, to the present day this is the position in which many Russian minorities are forcibly held — LGBT people, migrants and many others. You always and constantly have to prove you are miserable and damaged enough to be granted some mercy. You aren’t allowed to be bold, ambitious, to be on equal footing with “normal” people.

¹Mercy for the Fallen performance in Teart.doc, Moscow <https://youtu.be/2yAlvd8I7L8>

The paradox of this stigma is that you have to be a poster-lunatic. If you're highly functional, people simply don't believe you. There were times in my life when I told everyone around I had schizophrenia. And no one believed it, because I didn't look bad enough: I play concerts, have tattoos and wear red lipstick. I felt so frustrated that I was ready to show them my clinical records.

Mad and proud

After my performance I got really close with Katrin. One evening we were sitting in KFC just having coffee and suddenly started to wonder why there was no platform in Russia that could unite different activists operating in the field of mental health. There was no organized self-advocacy in Russia, though we had many individual activists. When you work alone for a long time, you feel like you are literally in a flat field and your efforts and influence are extremely limited.

So we posted an open call, and people started gathering at my place quite regularly. A couple of other artists joined us, among them Alyona Aghadzikova, who was responsible for all our photoshoots. Coincidentally she also had her own history of life with mental illness, which was anxiety disorder, so we three girls became the core of the movement.

At some point it came to our minds that it could be cool to recreate a real Mad Pride in Russia. No one has dared to do it here before. So we found a governmental advertisement for May Day in March 2018. It was described as free and open to everybody, so we decided to make our own column and join the March with our posters.

Mad Pride¹ is a mass movement of the users of mental health services which advocates that people have a right to be not ashamed but proud of their mental abnormalities. The first public march gathered in 1993 in Toronto. Since then, dozens of events around the globe have been organized under this name.

But when we arrived at the point we discovered that the march actually wasn't meant for everyone. It was organized for official trade unions and every column had to be registered in advance. The cops spotted us and saw a really weird group, very young in comparison to the others, with strange posters like "I know my diagnosis, and you?", "I'm not ashamed" and "There's more of us than it seems".

I remember them looking through our posters like "there's nothing clearly political here". Possibly they thought it was some Navalny crowd trying to invade the sacred space of an official event, so they decided to get rid of us just in case. They could've just asked us what was going on, but it's naive to expect politeness from Russian cops.

It was a dangerous moment. I tend to struggle with controlling my impulses at times, so when the cops started pushing and pulling us, grabbing me by the hand, I started fighting back. I was furious, I saw cops literally throwing our guys to the ground and tearing our posters.

It wasn't the worst possible scenario, they didn't beat us or anything, yet they did act the way cops do. I watched the footage afterwards and realized that me and Katrin attracted most of the attention since we fought back. Luckily, we distracted the police from the rest of the group. The cops were just grouping them together in a circle and afterwards escorted everybody to their "party vans".

For most of the participants this was the very first clash with police. We had several people with cerebral palsy in the

¹ Mad Pride in Moscow, 2018

<https://therussianreader.com/tag/psychoactive-movement-russia/>

crowd, and a couple of people with severe anxiety, like Alyona. She had this huge panic attack so we had to talk the cops into letting her take the front seat with them instead of being put in an actual cage in the back of the truck.

What really astounded me, however, was the reaction of our participants. They weren't scared off by this unfortunate occasion and the majority returned to work with us on the festivals that we organized later.

Fortunately, the cops didn't really know what to do with us, so they let us all free in a couple of hours. We weren't fined, they let us go without so much as any protocol.

Eventually this Labor Day detention turned out to be an excellent promo for our newly fledged Psychoactive movement. We woke up famous, visited several big TV channels with interviews, which gave the whole story an unexpected and excellent boost.

We realized our mistake in joining an officially organized event. So we did two more Mad Prides the following years as a collaboration with a parody project called Monstation¹, and everything went smoothly.

Psychoeducation

While the hype was still in the air, we started working on our first mental disorder festival. We called it PsychGorFest, as an acronym for Psychiatric City Festival — a play on Soviet-style acronyms.

PsychGorFest is a series of psychoeducative and activist festivals organised by the Psychoactive movement in Moscow and Saint Petersburg in 2018–2021.

The organizers gathered activists, artists and experts in the fields of psychology and psychiatry to offer open and free lectures and

¹ Monstration marches <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2018/05/02/all-power-to-imagination-a61326>

workshops for youth. In total, over 1,000 participants attended seven events.

Stigma is heavy in Russia, however, Russia is huge. It would be fair to say that in bigger cities it's better, while the regions are still very much prejudiced. There's a severe lack of general psychoeducation.

Basic psychoeducation is highly important, because mental illnesses provoke fear of the unknown. Especially psychotic conditions — they generate fear and tension that results in stigma. It is important to remember that stigma rarely appears out of nowhere. You should be able to recognize the basis of it to deconstruct it and to calm people by educating them.

I feel like in the modern Russian media there's already enough information concerning so-called neurotic conditions like depression or anxiety. It is time to move on and venture into darker territories of psychotic illnesses. I believe we shouldn't sugarcoat things and be open about the dangers of psychotic conditions. There's a popular approach which argues that the "danger of psychiatric conditions is a myth". But we all know that's a lie. Under certain circumstances people might become a threat not only to themselves but to others. Some people might come to the wrong conclusions influenced by voices and sometimes they commit crimes. And that doesn't erase their suffering. We should talk about it if we really want to recognize these symptoms in our friends and family or even ourselves and be able to truly help.

Unfortunately, sometimes education kind of gets ahead of the medical help available: you might understand that something is wrong and start looking for a doctor, but just cannot find one in your small town.

Often people ask me to recommend a doctor or a hospital and it's always a tricky question. The more I interact with mental health institutions, the more problems I see and I can hardly name a couple of clinics that are ideal or close

to ideal. Luckily, there are some really progressive young doctors who are willing to learn and influence the system in the best of ways. However, they are few and mostly concentrated in the two biggest Russian metropolises, St. Petersburg and Moscow.

I was a strange kid from the age of four

It all started at the age of four. I have a vague recollection of my first experiences of something resembling derealization. I would wake up at nights feeling claustrophobic in the darkness and in my own body. These sensations were totally alien and I certainly didn't have the sufficient vocabulary to describe it so I just cried and yelled.

Derealization is a mental state where you feel detached from your surroundings. People and objects around you may seem unreal: the world appears lifeless, muted or fake, objects or people look “wrong” — blurry, unnaturally sharp, too big, or too small. Derealization can be a symptom of a medical condition like depression or schizophrenia. Other times, it can happen on its own, often in reaction to severe trauma or stress.

Eventually my parents scheduled a session with a psychiatrist who prescribed me some pills they never gave me. It was some neuroleptic drug that my parents considered too heavy for a small child.

I was an odd kid, but I was never a classic loner. I think I had some histrionic tendencies — I was a liar, I loved to play games and set up experiments, but I was also very reserved, and this combo somehow attracted people. I always had a circle of close friends who engaged in the fantasies I've continued promoting up to today.

I also naturally edged towards the darker side of things. I was a Goth kid and that helped me a great deal. I was somehow prepared to become abnormal and maybe even enjoyed it until a certain moment. School was a different story though,

kids thought I was a “lunatic” and they didn’t want me around although I was friendly.

When I hit seventeen, stuff got wild. I remember waking up in the middle of the night after some party, feeling that I was dying of a heart attack. I felt like I was dying but it wasn’t a physical sensation alone — the environment was somehow changing too. Back then I didn’t understand that it was a combination of a panic attack and derealization.

For the next half a year my condition would only get worse. I started getting these bouts on a regular basis, and they literally lasted for hours daily. I would wake up, feel OK for about 15 minutes and then my mind would just hit the switch and reality would evaporate.

This experience of distorted reality is hard to put into words. The most fitting description would be “entering a trip”. When you drop acid for instance, there is a phase when you aren’t actively hallucinating yet, but the effects are already there so your perception starts changing. You look at the things around you and they present all sorts of intentions — they can seem sharp, angry, ominous.

I was living in this condition for literally days. I would sometimes just leave the real world. I would fall out of conversation, unable to recall how exactly I got to a certain place. It tortured the hell out of me and the fact that I was a university student didn’t make it easier. I had to study and at least imitate the control I had lost over my everyday functioning.

I remember an episode of severe derealization. I was with my friends, we were walking down the street after our classes and then something hit me and I don’t really remember what happened next. I came to my senses later on in an internet cafe and realized we were all staring at a computer screen with a photo of some old dude and laughing. I was laughing with them, but I couldn’t recall a single detail of our walk or how we got there or why. Apparently I was acting normal enough for them to not

notice something was wrong. After several experiences of this kind I mastered my poker face.

I used to think that when people go crazy it must be obvious. I also thought they weren't able to observe their condition or realize that something was wrong. But the abnormality of these sensations was obvious to me. I knew I wasn't OK. I realised from the get go it had something to do with psychiatry. I was trying to share this with someone but I couldn't find the words. My friends tried to come up with explanations of all sorts. They would say stuff like "Oh it is just a hangover, you drank too much at yesterday's party" or "You need some rest, you study way too hard" or "I'm also feeling dizzy today. It's the weather".

But as much as I wanted to believe them I knew that wasn't the case. No hangover can last for half a year. I started googling stuff and came across the definition of panic attacks. Unfortunately, this never led to an actual meeting with a doctor. I underestimated the severity of what was going on.

There's an early phase of a psychiatric condition that is called premorbid. It's the period when certain abnormalities are already there but not affecting your life noticeably enough to seek professional help. The premorbid phase can be extremely long especially for schizo-spectrum disorders; it can last for years and even decades.

For the next four or five years the situation was wavy: I would get worse, then I would get better for seemingly no reason. I grew accustomed to some of the symptoms as well, which made my life easier but also slowed down my treatment.

I developed illusions at some point. Auditory illusions are not full fledged hallucinations yet: this is when your brain distorts already existing sounds instead of producing non-existent ones. Illusions may sound like a change in the velocity or the quality of a real sound, and it's an extremely unpleasant experience.

Psychosis

By the age of 25 I knew that I was probably exhibiting both schizoid and histrionic traits. Coincidentally, psychiatry became my special interest at that point as my professional field was connected to it. I was working as an ABA-therapist with a nonverbal child on the autistic spectrum whose father was living with bipolar disorder. I was also doing simultaneous translations in the field of psychiatry. So I learned a lot about autism and other mental conditions. What I didn't expect, however, was full fledged psychosis.

I moved to Saint Petersburg and started working as an event manager at a nightclub. That meant not sleeping all night and having too much alcohol. I soon became paranoid with frightening illusions. I lived in constant fear.

Once I slept all day after work. When I woke up, I felt something was happening with my apartment: furniture started moving with strange sounds. I was eating a plate of rice and the grains suddenly looked like worms. I panicked, threw away the food and started crawling around my room looking for the worms.

That year turned out to be the worst of my life: I had three hospitalizations in a row, two of them involuntary with severe depression afterwards.

I just laid on my bed for days, unable to read or write or even bathe. My mother brought me to several doctors and they warned her that this could signal **a defect** — a stage of schizophrenic disorder, when the psychic state is irreversibly damaged and the personality starts falling apart.

But at some point my condition reached a certain plateau and things got better. I believe I'm on this plateau now, and I truly hope it will last.

I went through so many diagnostic variations: a set of personality disorders, a set of mood disorders. I was labeled bipolar at some point. Then I was diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia due to that paranoid episode, but

I knew that wasn't the case. Then schizoaffective disorder, which I feel more or less fits. But I don't associate my identity with whatever diagnosis I may or may not have. It's just a label for me.

Schizoaffective disorder is a psychiatric condition that combines symptoms of psychosis and mood disorder (mania and depression), often in cycles. There are periods of improvement followed by symptomatic periods. In Russia schizoaffective disorder is often misdiagnosed as schizophrenia, but it is important to distinguish these two conditions as they imply different treatment. Schizoaffective disorder is supposed to have a more positive outlook than schizophrenia.

The golden age of Russian psychiatry

There is a prevailing myth that Russian psychiatry has always been regressive. This isn't exclusively true. The first two decades of the USSR were actually quite progressive and innovative within the field of medical science, particularly neurological studies. Russia was home to many great minds like Ivan Pavlov, Vladimir Beckterev and Pyotr Gannushkin, who paved the way for subsequent generations.

That Golden Age has long since passed but a huge number of modern doctors in Russia tend to subscribe to those ideas which were at one time innovative, but aren't today. Those ideas dehumanized patients and still rely on methods that had been considered acceptable in Europe some forty years ago.

The approach to autism is a good example. Back in the 1930's, the international scientific community agreed on autism being a condition related to the schizophrenia spectrum. This hypothesis turned out to be wrong, although within the institutional Russian practice adults and even children continue to be diagnosed with schizophrenia when they are evidently on the autistic spectrum.

Once I had to decline hospitalization because of a clearly ignorant doctor. I had a chorus of voices in my head and was truly afraid, so I called an ambulance. The doctor concluded

I was psychotic and had no insight into my condition, the judgment was made just having looked at the tattoos on my wrists. She didn't even try to talk to me to understand my background, making her conclusion based on the 1960's psychiatry books that say tattoos are a frequent sign of antisocial women. Some psychiatrists still believe that if you have no family and kids by 30, there's something wrong with you.

I believe this rigid part of the scientific community is a pressing issue. Many old-school doctors feel like their golden age has to be brought back. They are sceptical and reluctant regarding any innovations, saying arrogantly "They are always changing things in the West for the sake of being progressive alone, but WE know better".

As a self-advocacy activist, I've made many attempts to collaborate with institutions, and it's a holy pain. They don't seem to understand the value of a patient's perspective at all, many of them don't truly want to learn.

I also believe that psychiatrists need increased interaction with fellow professionals and conjoined medical fields. So many specialists behave like their patients are nobody else's business. They don't even question the possibility of there being physiological or hormonal reasons behind a certain condition.

Psychiatry all over the globe relies mostly on observation, we can't run a test to prove someone is bipolar or schizophrenic or locate this "defect" in the brain. This, combined with old-school thinking, leads to many diagnostic mistakes and unreasonable prescriptions.

Additionally, doctors tend to forget that the pills we are taking are actually harmful. We all know the side effects are sometimes nothing short of disastrous. We should only take them when we are sure there's no other option, and no one should take heavy neuroleptics for months and years "just in case".

I love to challenge myself

I used to take the same pills for a long time. Currently I'm not on pills, I am doing cognitive-behavioral psychotherapy, primarily because I believe I'm in remission at this point. I should say that doctors don't always understand that psychotherapy should go hand in hand with medical treatment regardless of whether your patient is neurotic or psychotic. I'm convinced that everyone needs therapy. If you really want to experience prolonged effects of medical treatment you need to sustain your improved condition with hours of therapy. A pill isn't a magic pill.

I know I can give the impression of a very functional person, but that's an illusion. When you're something of a public figure people only notice your accomplishments — your music, actions, releases. But that's just a part of the whole picture. They get this image of you as this perpetuum mobile.

Schizoaffective disorder heavily affects your emotions, the way bipolar disorder does (they actually belong to the same cluster of affective disorders). Even though I haven't had any psychotic episodes for several years, I still have regular depressive periods.

I think I manage to stay in shape because I cling to the things I truly enjoy doing and they lift me up. If I have a gig to play, I'll go to the rehearsal even if waking up and forcing myself to move seems unbearable. Eventually, I get a kind of natural reinforcement from simply liking what I do. I also love to challenge myself and overcome obstacles in the same manner as a quest. I'm not suggesting that anyone should rely solely on these things. It's easy to start blaming yourself for not being able to overcome any obstacle or challenge. I also lean greatly on the help of my mom. She realizes just how low functioning I can get at times and she's always there to help me stand.

In the future I would love to be recognized as something more than just a person who talks about her mental illness.

I believe everyone goes through an identity crisis at some point in life, but it's important not to get stuck in just one dimension of your personality. I believe that sooner or later I will grow out of self-advocacy alone, and move on to something new.

Recorded in June, 2020

Update from Sasha from March 9, 2022

Recent events have hit people with mental disorders hard. Many of us face acute episodes, triggered by political and economic unrest, the absence of imported drugs and misunderstanding from our families who support the official policy.

Those who attempt to protest are being brutally detained by police. They even stop random people in the metro or street to check their private messages, threatening those who fail to comply!

We try hard to pull ourselves together and support each other. The Psychoactive team is launching a psychological course "How to survive amid political anxiety". It's a series of free webinars from psychologists and activists, available to everyone.

“I am a weirdo, but that’s what I am,” – Nikolai Kurbatov, director of editing and poet

“At 20 years old, I hit the peak of my activity: I was the best student in my group at the university, although the Economics and business administration specialty wasn’t that close to my heart. I took acting classes, made dozens of videos in a row. It all took too much of a toll on me and eventually led to depression.

After being discharged from the psychiatric hospital, I had an “up” during which I made my most successful video, a trailer for the movie “V for Vendetta”. When the big players started commissioning trailers from me, I couldn’t have imagined that I was seriously ill. My activity increased day by day, eventually leading me to psychosis.”



At age 30, Nikolai Kurbatov was registered as disabled at the age of 22 due to bipolar disorder complicated by psychotic episodes. However, over the past several years, it hasn't stopped him from writing over 26,000 articles for Wikipedia, creating 900 movie trailers with a total of hundreds of millions of views, and getting into the Russian Book of Records nine times.

Several major Russian newspapers wrote about Nikolai's achievements. But the young man has categorically refused to meet with journalists in person, being "afraid to say too much". Thus, this is the only interview in this book that I conducted via messenger.

11 million views

Back in my teenage years, I started to get interested in trailers for famous movies and quickly learned to edit similar videos myself. It seems to me that modern trailers are more absorbing and “epic” than the movies themselves, especially Russian ones.

I had no acquaintances in the film industry and lived in the industrial city of Perm, which is far from the capital. I just sent my portfolio to the head of “Trailer Studios” in Moscow by email. He criticized them harshly at first, but then he saw the “V for Vendetta” trailer, was very impressed by it, and wrote a review praising it on his blog. The video was spotted by the head of a large production center that made promos for popular Russian films like “Inhabited Island” and “The Tsar”. I told him that I really wanted to create official trailers, and just a few days later, he commissioned my first project.

“It’s hard to describe how surprised and delighted I was to see such an incredible video. A clear structure, well-chosen music, and the perfect pace of the trailer. Dialogue has the core and delicate editing, and, most importantly, a well-delivered storyline, which is very rare for Russian trailers. Who gives a damn that this is a rare occasion in which the trailer shows too much. Very cool!” — Innokentii Skirnevskii, head of the “Trailer Studio”, on Nikolai’s video.

Since then, “Vendetta” has gotten over a million views, as have my trailers for “Titanic” and “The Lion King.” Later, I also had trailers with two and three million views, for example for “Infinity War” and “Avengers: Endgame”, and even one video which I chose music for had over 11 million views.

I had the good fortune to make official trailers for high-grossing films with famous Russian actors: Nadezhda Mikhalkova, Mikhail Porechenkov, Bogdan Stupka, Sergei Garmash, Mikhail Efremov, and many others.

But most of my videos I consider failures because I made them for money.

I'm convinced that art made for money is not art. I've always put in less effort when expecting to be paid for the project. The more I was offered, the worse the result... The works I'm most proud of were made completely for free. Among them, for example, is the official trailer for the documentary about Russian street-art group "Voina". I believe that trailers, teasers, and TV ads are a unique type of art that shouldn't be made for profit. For me, they are definitely more sublime and beautiful than even poetry, which I'm also exceptionally fond of.

As such, I decided to give a part of my royalties to charity — to Chulpan Khamatova's "Gift of Life" foundation. I also recently made a video for a local charity foundation.

With time, I arrived at the conclusion that given my emotional difficulties, I could not permit myself to make official movie trailers. My work is too uninvolved, in my opinion. Talented work has to be emotional to leave an impression. I think the most talented people are choleric by temperament and I, unfortunately, am clearly melancholic. "Vendetta" is probably more emotional than the other videos but that's due to the music and voice-over, and by now, I'm even bored rewatching it.

I don't at all believe in the "special gifts" of people with bipolar disorder. I even checked statistically whether hypomania has made me more talented: I compared the viewer retention time of "Vendetta", the only video I produced in hypomania, with the other ones created in a neutral state. This indicator demonstrates exactly how captivating the video is. And the retention time for "Vendetta" was no better and even worse compared to many other projects of mine.

To watch list: best of Nikolai's videos

"V for Vendetta" (unofficial trailer)

<https://bit-ly.ru/OjbWR>

“Avengers: Endgame” (unofficial trailer)
<https://bit-ly.ru/OCY8x>

“Avengers: Infinity War” (unofficial trailer)
<https://bit-ly.ru/oGUVe>

“The Great Gatsby” (unofficial trailer)
<https://bit-ly.ru/j7OrY>

“Tomorrow” (official trailer for the documentary about the art group “Voina”)
<https://bit-ly.ru/XDWLL>

“Domovoy” (official trailer for a Russian fantasy comedy)
<https://bit-ly.ru/cxBHn>

My Wikipedia

I’ve always been energized by the viewers and readers of my work. It feels so fulfilling when your work is seen and appreciated by millions of people! And I thought that Wikipedia was a great opportunity to show what I could do. I’ve been fond of numbers since childhood, though I can’t really say why. My spirits are also lifted by the amount of projects I have completed. I’ve always wished to accomplish a lot without sacrificing quality.

I managed to become one of the ten most productive authors on the English-language Wikipedia — over 37% of articles on Russian movies were created by me, and I’ve won six Wikipedia awards for them. I’ve written successful articles not only on Russian films, but also on foreign ones, in particular, the film “Joker” (2008).

Not so very long ago, I thought about the fact that there are tens of thousands of settlements in Russia and almost none of them are on the English Wikipedia. So I started writing articles about Russian cities in several languages. I learned

English on my own with the help of computer games and films, and German is the language I learned at school. Recently, I also started looking into Italian, and I'm trying to publish articles in German, French, Portuguese, Croatian, and Dutch.

How to get into “The Book of Records”

I decided to get into the “Russian Book of Records” out of a sheer sense of competition. I'd been dreaming of claiming some kind of record since I was 14, but for a long time, I couldn't decide on the exact field. In 2016, when I already had produced a lot of trailers, I decided to try, and just a few days later, the record was recognized. And not just one.

Nikolai has a total of nine all-Russian records. Among them are the largest number of Wikipedia articles in English and the video with the largest number of likes without dislikes (a fan video for the movie “The Great Gatsby”).

Nikolai's achievements were even recognized by the mayor of the city of Perm, the place of his residence, who gave him a letter of commendation.

“I was born weak and depressed”

I had the misfortune to be born melancholic in temperament with an asthenic build. People of this sort are seen as the weakest both physically and emotionally.

I've strived to be active throughout my whole life: I engaged in all kinds of sports — athletics, freestyle football, basketball. I watched thousands of films: Soviet, Asian, Hollywood, and finally took up studying modern Russian cinema. I made videos, wrote film reviews, articles, and short stories.

At 20 years old, I hit the peak of my activity: I was the top student in my group at the university, although the Economics and business administration specialty wasn't that close to my heart. I took acting classes, made dozens of videos in a row. It

all took too much of a toll on me and eventually led to depression.

I felt constant fatigue, yet was unable to sleep. I could no longer cope with my studies and couldn't even watch movies. So I decided to undergo treatment in a psychiatric hospital.

After being discharged from the hospital, I had an "up" during which I made my most successful video, a trailer for the movie "V for Vendetta". When the big players started commissioning trailers from me, I couldn't have imagined that I was seriously ill. My activity increased day by day, eventually leading me to psychosis.

Not realizing what I was doing, I threw all of my dishes out the window, smashed the electronics in my flat, and then lurched out onto the street naked.

I was sent to the hospital again. I took a medical leave from university and continued to work on commission despite my agitation and poor concentration. I went through another depression, but this time it was milder, so there was no need to go to an institution. Soon after, I returned to my university. The doctors allowed me to gradually withdraw from my main antipsychotic medication, which produced boundless joy.

I was unaware that this upturn would bring me to hospital again. On attending a psychoeducation lecture in hospital, I first heard about manic-depressive illness and instantly knew it was exactly what I was going through. I asked the doctor and he confirmed my suspicions.

The diagnosis helped me cope with my life more than it impeded it. In any case, I wouldn't have been able to do some regular full-time work and couldn't have competed with "healthy" people. So I consider my disability pension a gift from fate.

At the age of 22, I received a disability group and was granted a small pension that is more or less enough to live on. I live with my mother, only go out for walks, and don't use public transport. I don't smoke or drink. I don't go to the cinema either, and watch all movies online. Besides leading

a frugal lifestyle, I have some savings from my video royalties.

I take a mood stabilizer and an antipsychotic regularly, and I suppose this is what has kept me in remission for eight years now. My condition is far from perfect: there are mood swings and I often feel depressed. When feeling down, it feels like life is going to be like that forever and it is absolutely excruciating. Then the depressed state gives way to the moments in which I want to live forever. My attention span is severely impaired. I'm unsure if it's because of the illness or the antipsychotic medication. I have to re-examine trailers and songs several times to ensure I comprehend the overall theme.

But at least I've been at home all these years, there have been no more hospitalizations. I sleep well and can work productively.

“I can write 300 articles in a day”

Creativity helps me stay afloat. In depression, I am unable to edit videos, but manage to compose poems and write articles for Wikipedia.

I maintain a healthy lifestyle: walk a lot, always go to bed before 11 p.m., and try to work every day even if I don't feel well. My work regimen is free. Whenever I feel inspired, I get straight to work. To put myself in the right mood, I watch live concerts of my favorite musicians on YouTube. I'm especially inspired by emotional and melancholic music. I have a rather boring life now, so I am more inclined towards dynamic songs and trailers. I can listen to “Right in the heart” by Sergey Lazarev and “Slowed” by Ani Lorak endlessly!

My productivity varies. There were times when I could write 30 poems and create over 300 Wikipedia articles in a day! On average, one poem takes me 5–7 minutes, one trailer — 30–40 minutes, and an article — only a few minutes. The work is fast because it's typically mostly technical: I just collect information and transform it into the Wikipedia for-

mat. It's quite a monotonous task, but I can't sit down doing nothing: I feel like the day goes to waste if I don't create something.

Four years ago, I started writing poems. I've loved them since my school years. And when I was making "Vendetta", the poems combined harmoniously with the music. After some time, I felt that I was able to write something myself, and I've already created over 1,800 poems.

* * *

*I have done too much stupid in my life:
I've often tried to do what wasn't for me,
Wherever I could, I wrote with no end
About myself, proudly adding: "I am so ill!"*

*I have regretted that endless times
But went on forcing myself on all of you
And thought that this way you'd take me seriously,
But instead, I heard only: "God, what is he doing!"*

*There is no forgiveness for my mistakes, and
I know:
For those like me, there is no place in history.
My love for art is limitless, yes,
But I am what I am, and that is a weirdo.*

* * *

*I love to live, although that isn't life.
Nothing but suffering, ailments, and trouble...
But still, I'm happy that I opened my notepad;
That I'm writing, though my poems aren't
splendid.*

*I hope that you will find something for yourself.
I hope my work will not go to waste.
There is no hope for me to fix the damned bug.
I can't put out the fires in my mind.*

*But what can you do? That's life, no matter how
you look.
It's complicated and not always that great.
You aren't human if there are no walls on
your way.
I believe that I can rise from the ashes!*

*And I will prove to myself that nothing can
stop me;
That I am a creator and not only in my work.
My illness will fade from memory like a terrible
dream.
I don't need anything! Except for a bit of patience...*

*Poems by Nikolai Kurbatov
(translated by Anastasia Egorova)*

I've never kept my diagnosis a secret and never feared being judged because of it. My relatives and friends support me, although I probably bother them with these mood swings. The doctors have always treated me kindly, as well.

I don't think living with a mental illness is terribly hard. You have to follow the rules: maintain a healthy lifestyle, quit bad habits, and take the meds. And hope everything will be alright.

*Recorded in May 2020,
supplemented in February 2021*

“Darkness always fades”, – Alisa Chernikova, book editor

My first depressive episode began at the age of fourteen and lasted for six continuous years. It was so severe that depression hardly describes its depths. I later experienced the same in adulthood. I used to refer to my state of mind as “inner jihad” because I was constantly at war within, mercilessly punishing myself for whatever I thought I did wrong. As I could do very little, this made life difficult.

I was eighteen when I first got hospitalized. It was my third suicide attempt in three months. I felt as if my world was crashing down on me the whole year, leaving me lost under the debris.

I remember the psychiatrist indifferently asking me if my boyfriend had “dumped me”.

This is when I realized she simply didn’t care, so I decided not to argue.

I was kept in the hospital for a week, but no proper medical evaluation was ever conducted, and I didn’t receive a diagnosis. It was the 90’s, and the country was steeped in poverty. Not only did the hospital lack basic things like meds, but also food. Luckily, my friends visited me every day and brought me food without which I would’ve definitely starved.

That was when I first encountered other patients with extended medical histories, which made me believe that in comparison to them, I was doing really well, and had no right to complain.



Alisa Chernikova, now 42, has contributed to more than two hundred books, mostly dedicated to the human brain and psyche. In her spare time, she makes jam and invents her own recipes with original names.

We met twice, both times coincidentally. Our first connection happened online: Alisa edited my English-to-Russian translation of the world-famous book on bipolar disorder, “Unquiet Mind” by Kay Jameson. We finally got to know each other in person in Odessa, also by chance. Of all the houses available, she happened to choose the same studio as I had for her vacation — an old shell limestone building I’d serendipitously rented a few days earlier.

In her interview with me, Alisa opened up about her struggles with depression and how she manages to fight it, creating more and more space for herself, her friends and creative work. She also shared her favorite books with us and a jam recipe she ironically labeled “Courage and Stupidity.”

My 200 books

My interest in books has existed for as long as I can remember. I felt especially drawn to psychology. I recall reading Sigmund Freud when I was just 14, mostly because those were the only psychology books I could get my hands on in the local library. I graduated from high school in the Far East of Russia, in the small town of Slavyanka near Vladivostok. I tried to enroll in the recently opened Faculty of Psychology, which was extremely popular at the time. There were only a few state-funded places, and I did not qualify. I eventually decided to enter the less popular philological faculty, having no idea where or how I would be able to use such an impractical education.

I started adjusting my lifestyle to my mood swings while at the university. I could literally procrastinate for a solid month and then enter a hypomanic state and finish all the work in a couple of days. I had to skip a lot of lessons because I needed a job to earn a living. Also, hanging out with friends was certainly more enticing than learning. A week before the mid-year exams, I'd sit down alone, immerse myself in study and end up with all A's.

I was lucky, able to move to Saint-Petersburg a year after my graduation and get a job as a secretary in a publishing house. This is how my career began to take shape: after just half-a-year I was offered the position of deputy editor-in-chief. Unfortunately, this was 2008, the year of the global financial crisis, and my position was soon cut.

I thought I'd try something easier, and started freelancing. Even prior to getting an official diagnosis, I realized that a flexible schedule and the ability to get some rest during depressive periods was the key to my productivity. In the beginning I accepted all sorts of offers for editing, from business manuals to books on personal growth.

Over the past 12 years as a freelancer, I've edited more than 200 books for a number of major publishing houses, primarily in the field of popular science.

A couple of years ago I finally began to be able to have the luxury of choice — I now only accept books that interest me. I figure if the publishing house agreed to work on my terms it must mean I really am a good editor! This approach has proven to be very productive, as previously I used to put off boring texts until the very last moment.

I still read a significant amount of literature on psychology, almost anything I could get my hands on. At first my interest was mostly spontaneous, but when I turned thirty, I started to realize the nature of my illness. In the last couple of years, I've also gotten into psychiatry and neurobiology. I specifically enjoy personal accounts of people with different mental and developmental disabilities such as depression or autism.

Alisa's reading recommendations

Popular books on psychiatry that could be used to improve self-knowledge:

- **The Noonday Demon: An Atlas of Depression by Andrew Solomon.**

This book's author suffered from terrible depressive episodes throughout his life. He tried everything in the hope of healing: from regular meds and years in therapy to ancient rituals. However, this is more than just a personal story. Solomon describes basic symptoms of depression, its place in the history of humanity, the perception of depression in society, meds and many more aspects of the same. I don't think I've ever seen a book so extensive!

- **Lost Connections by Johann Hari**

Hari is a well-known journalist, so his writing style is exceptionally convincing. He includes a wide range of entertaining examples and links to scientific research.

This work is quite life-affirming: It helps you evaluate different areas of your life and see what you're missing. It's not always possible to get rid of depression by changing external

conditions, but it's certainly possible to improve your well-being.

- **Stumbling on Happiness by Daniel Gilbert**

The book talks about what happiness does and doesn't depend on. The author, among other things, argues that happiness is not directly related to wealth: above average income (sufficient to satisfy basic needs) at some point ceases to influence the feeling of happiness in any shape or form, so it doesn't matter if you earn one or 12 million a year.

- **Mad Ride! Citizens personal Guide on mental disorders** by Daria Varlamova and Anton Zainiev (in Russian).

A well-written book on major psychiatric disorders (and actually the first of this kind in Russia), their symptoms and treatment by two Russian authors. Brief, witty and very down-to-earth. I only realized that turning to a psychiatrist for help was really not such a big deal after finishing this book. A month later I finally arranged a meeting with the doctor.

I'm now enthusiastically promoting this book to my friends and everyone who has already been diagnosed or suspects they should be.

Six years of depression

My depression started at the age of 14 and lasted till 20. It was so severe that I struggled with the use of this word to describe the profound downs I experienced in adulthood. I used to refer to my state of mind as "inner jihad" because I was constantly at war with myself, mercilessly punishing myself for whatever I thought I couldn't do. Unfortunately, it seemed to be a long list. I used to believe this was a result of some trauma from childhood, only because I had no idea of what other possible explanation there could be.

I was eighteen when I first got hospitalized. It was my third suicide attempt in three months. I felt as if my world was crashing down on me the whole year, leaving me lost under the debris.

My partner, a person I loved deeply, left me. My family exploded into literal hell. I failed exams for the faculty I really wanted to enroll in. On top of that, I was broke. But worst of all – I felt incredibly lonely all the time, regardless of all the people around me.

I remember the psychiatrist indifferently asking me if my boyfriend had “dumped me”.

This is when I realized she simply didn’t care, so I decided not to argue.

I stayed in that hospital for a week, but no proper medical evaluation was ever conducted, and I didn’t receive a diagnosis. It was the 90’s, and the country was steeped in poverty. Not only did the hospital lack basic things like meds, but also food. Luckily, my friends visited me every day and brought me food without which I would have definitely starved.

This is when I first encountered other patients with extended medical histories, which made me believe that in comparison to them, I was doing really well, and had no right to complain.

I climbed out of this pit by myself, which was a valuable experience: realizing I could cope with whatever came and help myself.

I was 30 when I first attended a training session on personal growth, which is something I don’t recommend that anyone ever do, regardless of their health.

The first stage made me fall into hypomania for a couple of months, the second stage was a plunge into severe depression. I looked around at my fellow students, realizing how different my reaction to the training was, thinking that I probably needed to turn to a therapist. At that time I had to live between six cities. When you are a freelancer, you can live virtually anywhere, so I used to visit all my friends in turn. I tried not to stay alone. because it was intolerable. When a loved one is close, it’s easier not to sink to rock bottom.

Finally, I decided to settle down somewhere. I chose the city of Dnipro, because I like Ukraine and have many friends

there. At some point things really started working out: a friend from Dnipro offered me a job, and thanks to that, I was able to get a resident's permit. Unexpectedly, I became a marketer at an IT start-up and began to master a new profession. But I put too much pressure on myself, which quickly resulted in my depression suddenly getting worse. I took a vacation to rest, but it simply didn't help. That's when I had to admit I just wasn't coping on my own. At the age of 37, I turned to a psychotherapist for the first time in my life.

The doctor talked to me for an hour and admitted that my condition looked like bipolar disorder, but said that he still needed to observe me several more times to confirm the diagnosis. I continued to visit him for two weeks and managed to tell him my whole life story.

The diagnosis didn't really disappoint me per se, rather it calmed me; I figured, if I had psychiatric issues I felt I could somehow fix or manage them. I turned to a state-funded hospital for psychiatric help and to get a prescription for my meds. I was lucky to initially get a really competent doctor — the head of the hospital.

My condition was already fairly severe, so I got the full package as a result: normotimics, neuroleptics and tranquilizers. My anxiety faded for the first time in my life — I was so used to it that I could hardly imagine living without it. For years and years I never consciously realized there was always background noise, I tried to hide away, working obsessively, binging on books, computer games and, of course, alcohol.

I immediately decided that I would accept the rules of the game and take the drugs that I was prescribed carefully and correctly. Not everyone is able to do that. A friend of mine, for example, used to toss the pills away as soon as a depressive period ended. I realized that this kind of behavior would make my life more complicated, and it would take more time to get through the next episode.

I'm now in supportive therapy. Over four years the treatment routine had to be changed four times because it stopped working. The relapses haven't completely disappeared, but there aren't as many, and they usually occur for specific reasons. Like the isolation-driven episode that happened this spring when I didn't see any of my closest friends or family for a solid month during lockdown.

I became really outspoken about my diagnosis on social networks from the very first days of my diagnosis. Almost everyone who was important to me turned out to be very understanding and accepting. They didn't try to prove me wrong or frighten me. Some acquaintances don't understand what it is all about, because they haven't experienced anything like it themselves. But that doesn't really bother me. I work with progressive people in the publishing and media business, so my colleagues also accept my mood swings calmly and compassionately.

The stigma hardly touched me, but I'm by no means oblivious to its existence. Hopefully, in the not-too-distant future, mental illness will be treated in the same way as any chronic medical condition. So far, this isn't the case in Russia and Ukraine. Many of my acquaintances are terribly afraid to go to a psychiatrist, even when they are obviously unwell.

I immediately opened up about my illness to all of my relatives — I simply called them all one after another. Everyone supported me! You know, I used to have a really complicated relationship with my brother. But after he realized what I was going through, it got so much better! Over the last couple of years I've spent winters in St. Petersburg with my brother's family, where I'm surrounded by wonderful adults and children — my nephews, for example, I feel loved.

I followed up with a link to Stephen Fry's film "The Secret Life of the Manic Depressive", which perfectly captures the essence of the condition. It's amazing that I actually saw this film a long time ago, but for some reason didn't connect the dots. It turned out that many people had similar stories. For

example, Kay Jamison studied bipolar disorder and treated patients without realizing that the exact same thing was happening to her.

Kay Jamison is a clinical psychologist from the USA, researcher of bipolar disorder and writer. She experienced symptoms of bipolar disorder herself since adolescence, but realised it only after suicide attempt at the age of 28. She described her personal experience in a memoir “Unquiet Mind”.

I used to think that what was happening to me was not as what was happening to people with mental disorders. And then it dawned on me that the life I was living was indeed a nightmare.

Alisberry Jam

During each episode, I would tend to get incredibly reclusive and distance myself from those close to me. I watched long TV shows just to pass the time and got into different crafts. During one of these episodes, I took up knitting sweaters, eventually knitting eight of them and giving them all away to my friends to somehow express my gratitude to the people I love. I’d give them handmade gifts whenever there was no strength to communicate.

I started making jam for the same reason. I spent my first summer in Dnipro stuck at home cooking jam and distributing it to my friends. One of my friends asked me why I’d never considered making jam for sale. She also came up with “Alisberry Jam” as a brand name and started selling my products in her bar.

I soon realized that coming up with recipes and titles is actually a great way to be creative. I continue my research on what kinds of ingredients go well together and with that knowledge, create original recipes. Almost everything I need grows in Ukraine, you can buy berries and fruits for cheap and in any quantity. I’ve brewed about 250 cans this year alone.

I usually come up with a name for each recipe, and these names are at times even more attractive than tastes. For example, “Joy” and “Tenderness”, “Gifts of the Magi” and “Snobbery”, “Seize the Moment” and “Sarcasm”.

Friends often tell funny stories about my jam. For example, last year I created a recipe called “Temptation”: strawberries mixed with almonds and amaretto. One of my friends said he had given a jar of “Temptation” to his female friend, and, unwittingly, seduced her! Another friend of mine allegedly ate a jar of “Insolence” with chili peppers and went straight to his boss to ask for a salary increase (and got it!).

I now sell jams online [1], the entire production process taking place in my apartment. I’m entertaining the idea of a full-fledged company, however to do this I need a partner to take over the burden of organizational issues.

A Recipe from Alisa

Jam “Courage and stupidity”

(goes well with cheeses)

1 kg. of chopped lemons with the peel intact (finely chopped or ground in a food processor).

Add 1L. of water.

Cook for two hours on low heat (stir for the last half hour).

Take two lemons and cut them into halves.

Add 700g of sugar.

Cook on low heat for 20 minutes after boiling.

You can also add a teaspoon of pectin mixed with sugar at the end (pour it out slowly so that there are no lumps). Pectin turns it into jelly, enhances flavor, and serves as a preservative.

Keep your jam in jars for at least a week or two — it brings the flavors out even more!

More recipes on <https://www.facebook.com/alisovoe>

Surviving an episode

Psychotherapy has helped me a lot in adapting to the life of highs and lows. I have type 2 bipolar disorder, so I never get completely carried away from reality. Still, my episodes used to be fairly long and often severe.

Types of bipolar disorder

DSM-5 (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition) identifies several types of bipolar disorder.

The most common are:

Bipolar I disorder is a classic form of bipolar disorder in which severe mania (often with psychotic symptoms) alternates with depression of varying severity.

Bipolar II disorder is a disorder in which prolonged and often severe depressive episodes are more prevalent. They are replaced by periods of high spirits and activity, called hypomania.

Cyclothymic Disorder is assigned to individuals who experience mood cycling, but ups and downs are milder than in those who have Bipolar I or Bipolar II.

It was great to figure out what was happening to me, but it's much harder to accept that this is permanent. I have often felt that my life gets better as I grow older. I've found new ways to cope with difficulties, my depressive periods have become less severe, though I hoped that over time they would disappear completely. After the diagnosis, I realized that unfortunately it doesn't work this way, it was hard to come to terms with that.

I don't consider myself a disabled person. After reading a lot of literature on mood disorders, I came to the conclusion that this is a feature common for many people. We are simply more sensitive than others. Someone with a stable psyche might develop depression after the death of their loved one, when something as mundane as winter may be enough

to spark a depressive episode if you have a different mental constitution or a diagnosis.

Now, during the episodes, I don't force myself to do all the work, just the most necessary. I try to save energy when I'm depressed: I don't do house chores, I don't cook, I can wear the same clothes for a week so as not to think about what to choose. I take baths instead of showers because it takes less effort. I've been working my whole life, my self-discipline is good enough for me to be able to work for at least 2–3 hours in almost any condition. My motivation is to provide for myself and pay for housing, because no one will do it for me. In my opinion, those who completely quit working during their depressive episodes find it more difficult to return to work later. I accumulated quite a lot of debt throughout my longer episodes, because I only did the minimal amount of work, while my overdue rent was piling up. So I had to gradually pay back this money over the course of another 2–3 years.

Psychotherapy taught me another useful skill: asking for help, including asking for money. I have friends who were able to support me in difficult times. Prior to therapy, I was embarrassed to ask for anything at all. Another important skill is making a plan realistic enough for my current state, instead of relying on an idealistic picture.

It was terribly difficult to reorganize my daily routine and learn to plan things realistically. But I learned to praise myself instead of punishing: before, I scolded myself for everything I didn't do; now I praise myself for everything I've done.

Since I do freelance work, I only communicate with people I like and don't communicate with unpleasant customers — they disappear on their own. Why waste your energy on arguing and proving people wrong or trying to be someone else in the eyes of others?

I run a support group for bipolar patients in Dnipro. It started when I learned that my best friend, whom I've known for years, also suffers from bipolar disorder. I guess that's the

reason why we're friends! This wasn't the only unexpected coincidence: old friends started writing to me, saying that they also had bipolar disorder.

Here's another amusing incident: I once went to a coffee shop in the center of the Dnipro, and took a seat at the table where a stranger was already sitting. We had an unexpected dialogue:

- I love reading books on neurobiology.
- Me too
- Why?
- 'Cause I have bipolar
- Me too.

It's true that we didn't succeed as a classic support group. It's more of an informal community for people with a common diagnosis who meet up and communicate from time to time. We lacked energetic leaders that might have kept it more regular. However, we still hold informal meetups and have created a chatroom to share useful information like reviews on doctors, drugs, and psychotherapists. I hope it's useful at least for some visitors — helping them realize they're not alone or encouraging them to share their personal stories they probably haven't been able to reveal for years. Many members of our community have had issues with their parents and partners because they just can't understand or accept their condition. Additionally, many of them are forced to hide their condition at work.

Friendship saves me

I consider the ability to keep making friends to be my major talent. Over the years I have ended up with 15 really close people from Vladivostok, St. Petersburg, Irkutsk, Kiev, Iran, the USA, Germany, and England. I value them greatly and try to maintain relationships regardless of the distance. When

I feel well, I write letters, and try to meet more often. Friends never forget me, even when I disappear for a month. They have helped me out more than once in my most difficult moments.

I once lived in Moscow with a man who suddenly told me he didn't love me anymore and honestly never did. I cried hysterically for two weeks. I took all of my savings and ran to my friend in Crimea. She had a story similar to mine: she was also bipolar, and trying to work in a large organization. At some point she went on vacation to Crimea and didn't come back. From her point of view, life there is ideal and everything around is perfect. My friend helped me overcome my undying perfectionism, taught me to never force myself into a rat race, and to be grateful for what I have in each moment.

Three years into treatment, my life has become much more stable. There were no longer 6 to 12 months of "internal jihad" a year, leaving me with just two or three months of sub-depression, so I was able to make plans. Shortly before the lockdown, I imagined a future for myself, and even the pandemic and all of its grim consequences couldn't stop me. In the fall of 2020 I finally began studying psychotherapy officially.

I'll be able to enter my new profession in five years, and I truly believe my unique experience of life with extreme highs and lows, pain and suffering, excitement and love will most definitely help me become a skilled therapist. I know how it feels to give up, it's unbearable. But I also know what it feels like to keep going. Because darkness always fades.

Recorded in September 2020

Update from Alisa from March 1st, 2022

My country against my country. What is going on now hurts me each and every moment. Ukraine is my homeland no less than Russia is, I've spent nine years there. I happened to be in Saint Petersburg now just by chance, because I fell

in love here. If I could choose, I would prefer to be there, in Dnipro, where I felt so free.

Now I see that although we have much in common with our friends in Ukraine, we are still different. They feel free and proud of their country. They have nothing to be ashamed of.

And here in Russia we're being deprived of our last freedoms step by step.

They labeled the media I work for as a foreign agent and finally blocked our website.

They banned the very word "war", punishing people for saying it instead of formal "conflict" or "special military operation".

I am horrified to see what my country has become, how it is closing and distancing itself from the rest of the world. There's no previous "normal" life for Ukraine. There's no normal life for Russia either, although people yet refuse to accept this.

Maria Favorsky is a journalist, non-profit projects coordinator and mental health advocate from Russia. She previously wrote and published the first Russian “Bipolar disorder survival guide” and translated Kay Jamison’s bestseller “Unquiet Mind”.

This is a collection of personal stories of people living with bipolar spectrum disorders in post-Soviet countries. Eight men and women made the bold decision to be open and sincere about their illness and struggle for acceptance in a society full of stigma and oppression. All of them were successful in influencing the areas of psychoeducation, sexual education, civil rights and the arts. It is also a portrait of modern Russia, Ukraine and Belarus, their civil society and mental health care.