



Each of us

is part of the solution
Let's end mental health stigma together



“ My struggle with mental health issues started some twelve years ago. I wanted to share my experience since it was different in a way. Namely, I didn't hear people speak so much about problems with cognition. I was a graduate student and, naturally, it was very important for me to be able to focus on my readings understand them and elaborate them without going into surplus episodes. I experienced psychotic symptoms that didn't cut me off from reality, I always knew what they were. Same goes for my depressions and mood shifts. I recognized I need professional help and I sought it willingly, ready to collaborate.

I was never informed pharmacotherapy wasn't the only option although I don't regret using medication. It would have been my choice. First medication I got caused literally my weight to double in no less than six months. I was told it is normal. I liked sports and it made me sad I was so overweight. Also, I had to deal with side effect of increased appetite for some eight years before I got to the doctor that would listen to me and my family. With the proper therapy and my own diet in consultation with my doctor, I lost extra weight in less than year and a half, saving my health from consequences like heightened cholesterol or diabetes.

I am writing this as a warning to everyone seeking help: trust yourself and your subjective experience, talk to your practitioner about all the options and ask support from close people in getting them to hear you. As for my cognition, nobody believed me I want to study but simply can't focus. I was an excellent student and before I got sick and I started another degree parallel.

I had short concentration timespan so I was visiting museums. Paintings were different than sentences and they could wait till I can focus again. I found other coping strategies when it comes to music as well. Point is, with such problems, it is impossible to do any job, not just studying. My doctor at the time advised me to quit my education and start working manual job.

So I did, realizing that it is impossible to work in retail in such condition and realizing how little my doctor could understand. Later on I found out, using sites like Cochrane database that has great articles on treatment options for lay persons, that my medication at the time could have increased difficulties I've described. We need to be informed patients, it doesn't mean we are pretending to be professionals, but often people are discouraged from using resources and actually knowing how they are being treated.

After I managed to persuade my doctor to prescribe some recently available medication that could solve cognitive difficulties, I had a mixed episode caused by that medication and ended up in emergency in another hospital, closer to my home.

These things happen, no one can predict how one can respond to a medication but this experience pointed into the direction of the medication that finally worked for me, after eight years of searching. It took me roughly six years to be diagnosed with bipolar and ten years to my first remission, but I managed to go back to my studies and finish them with excellent marks.

I would recommend pharmacotherapy, I did talking therapy too, but I wanted to point out this side, since I would want to warn anyone in similar position that their illness is something individual, that it might be better for some to talk in terms of symptoms than diagnose and that they need to work closely with their practitioner and be proactive as best they can.

In some countries it is not easy. It is not easy in Croatia. I am still struggling with finding a job and not losing benefits when I am too sick to work. ”

Ivana, 34, from Croatia