



I'm a CEO and I Have Bipolar Disorder: It's Time to Share My Story



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In 2020, we launched the Henry's Foundation, in an effort to support the mental health of Canadians everywhere. My sister, the amazing Amy Stein, is exactly the right person to be its Executive Director, with her years of fundraising and sponsorship experience as well as her deep personal commitment to the cause. She's leading a bold pursuit of mental health awareness, de-stigmatization and support for Canadians.

Why did we decide to support mental health? Lots of reasons. But the big one is that it hits close to home: we have mental illness in our family. Our immediate family.

But it's not something we've talked about publicly. It's not a secret, but we've kept it quiet. Now we're telling our story loud and clear to show others struggling with their mental health that we are not letting these challenges define us.

The Tragic Catalyst

The Stein family has always been deeply rooted in community, and we believe very strongly in the importance of giving back. Over the years we've given to many causes and charities—for at-risk youth impacted by violence, cancer research, diabetes, gun amnesty and much more—and eventually we realized we would have a bigger impact if we narrowed our focus. So we decided to launch a foundation to target a specific cause, something that our employees could get behind, something that was important to our community and where we could really make a difference.

Something tragic happened that helped us define that focus: a close friend of our family and company died by suicide. We felt this deeply, personally. And there was something else. As we sat together at the funeral, it dawned on us that not one person there ever mentioned the cause of death or even said a word about mental health struggles.

We felt terrible for the family, and most of all the children. Not only did they lose a parent, but they also could not speak openly about what happened. Despite the huge progress in recent years, the stigma around mental illness and getting support continues. We decided then and there that mental health would be the focus of our foundation.

We realized as a family that if we wanted to really make a difference, we would have to open up about our own challenges. "We are part of this," we said. "If we don't tell our story, show that it's okay to open up, we are perpetuating the stigma."

And that included me. Every time I don't tell somebody about my own mental health situation, it's an opportunity lost. So here it is.

A Genetic Legacy

I have bipolar disorder.

Often called manic depression, bipolar disorder runs in our family. We suspect that my grandfather had bipolar disorder, although that diagnosis (or *any* diagnosis, really) was very uncommon in his time. He died by suicide in his mid-fifties.

My father also has bipolar disorder. My sister suffers from depression. I'll let them tell their own stories, but here's mine.

My symptoms emerged in my first year at McGill University in Montreal. It was the first time I was away from home; it was scary and exhilarating. I had a lot of very high highs and very low lows, but for a while I think it was easy to chalk it up to being a teenager experiencing a very new world.

Then one day I found myself at the Montreal airport but convinced I was in Arizona. I was arguing with airport staff because they wouldn't give me the bus schedule for Phoenix. I was confused and angry and scared. Frustrated, I left the airport irritated, and I didn't fully know why.

My emotions about that day are still very raw, two decades later. It's absolutely terrifying to know that my own mind had the capacity to betray me like that.

Once I came down from that manic state, I called home and told my mother what had happened.

A word about my mom. She is the rock of our family. As the only one of our foursome who doesn't suffer from mental illness, she's also the one who has borne the brunt of every one of our challenges and encouraged us to learn to manage them. She's seen each of us through very difficult times, something she surely didn't sign up for and that I know must be incredibly draining—and she's never complained. We are very lucky to have her.

I was lucky that day in Montreal, too. Having been through episodes like mine with my father, my mother knew that something was going on that went beyond teenage highs and lows. She flew out immediately and took me to get help.

The Journey to Mental Health is Never a Straight Line

Thus began my journey into the world of psychiatry and pharmaceuticals. It was not a straight line to health, I can assure you. I tried multiple different medications, many of which had unwelcome side effects. At times I became emotionally flat and more or less stopped eating. It took a good year to finally get my diagnosis right. But I was lucky. It can take years for people to get diagnosed and find the help they need.

Eventually I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder and got onto medication that worked. I will likely use medication to manage my condition for the rest of my life.

I'm grateful that I've never had another episode like that one. I do still sometimes have highs and lows that are probably outside of the "average" person's experience, and I've given my family, and especially my husband, carte blanche to call me out, to be my advocate if needed.

But all in all, today, my condition is extremely well-managed. I've become deeply attuned to my own mental health—the minute I sense even the slightest shift in myself, I run a mental checklist to see what might be going on. Am I getting enough sleep and exercise (both of which go a long way to reducing stress, which can otherwise be a major trigger of bipolar symptoms)? Do I need to call my therapist to talk through my emotions, which can really help? As needed, I'm also on the phone to my doctor to have my medication adjusted.

I have fantastic support around me. That's why I've always felt that only my closest friends and select colleagues needed to know. Every business, whether their CEO has mental health issues or not, should have governance structures in place to hold the leader accountable, and we *do*. Besides, my leadership style couldn't be further from command-and-control. I've always leaned heavily on the expertise of my executive team and close advisors, so I've never felt the need to disclose my disorder broadly.

It's Time for Me to Open Up

But in keeping this to myself I have been doing my community a serious disservice. I see that now. To my knowledge, no CEO in Canada has publicly shared their own struggles with a mental health disorder like mine. By keeping these issues quiet, we're pretending that CEOs, and business people alike, with mental illness don't exist. But we do.

More than that, we exist and *we are successful*.

My father struggled tremendously when he was younger, but he's succeeded in more ways than I can count. He's been married for fifty-two years, and he ran a successful business that became a Canadian icon under his watch. He has a wonderful community of close friends and colleagues—he's got an incredible connection to people. He's leaving a positive legacy for our family and for Canada.

A few years ago I had the privilege of hearing Margaret Trudeau speak at a YPO event. This was twenty years after my diagnosis, and it was the first time I'd ever heard anyone speak their experience with bipolar disorder, let alone the former prime minister's wife. She told her story with humour and vulnerability, as a human being, not a statistic. We all laughed and cried right along with her. I felt a connection that I'd never felt before.

I hope that by sharing my own story I can provide that same feeling to someone out there, make someone feel seen and understood and empowered. My diagnosis has shaped my life, but it hasn't controlled my life. I've never let it keep me down. I'm the mother of two amazing boys. I've been married for fourteen years. I'm the CEO and owner of a revered Canadian company, which I just saw through a [successful restructuring process in the midst of a global pandemic](#). Just like my dad, I have a wonderful community of friends and colleagues. I lead a rich, full life.

I'm a CEO, and I have bipolar disorder. Sharing my story is my first public contribution to helping eradicate the stigma surrounding mental illness—but by no means my last. I am incredibly proud of the great work being done by the Henry's Foundation's under Amy's leadership, and I hope you'll join us in working to ensure Canadians everywhere can get the mental health support they need.

To learn more about our #Uncapturedmoments community and to make a donation, visit www.henrysfoundation.com.