

Dipping Your Toes into Madness: Living with Bipolar Disorder

By Dr. Kathryn Irwin

Trigger Warning: The performance of “is this madness?” may contain potentially triggering material for some audience members. Please do what you need to protect your space when watching this Virtual Session.

THE FACTS

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, bipolar disorder affects approximately seven million adult Americans, or about 2.8% of the U.S. population 18 and older, which is up from the 5.7 million and 2.6% from the start of this project in 2017. One in five of those diagnosed will *succeed* with a suicide attempt. The rate of suicide is higher for patients with bipolar disorder than sufferers of unipolar major depression, panic disorder, or schizophrenia (NIMH).

What do you do when your best friend calls you and tells you she has a bipolar disorder diagnosis, and you read these statistics?

I wanted to do *something*. No, I *had* to. “is this madness?” was born.

THE IDEA

“is this madness?” by Joe W. Moore III was commissioned in 2017 as part of a

mental-health awareness project. The project was led by me and included a member of the community with bipolar disorder, Carly Tynes, along with Associate Professor in the Psychiatry Department at Michigan State University, Dr.



DR. KATHRYN IRWIN

Brian Smith, and composer Joe W. Moore III. “is this madness?” is based on interviews conducted with Carly after she was diagnosed with bipolar disorder. The purpose of this project was, and always will be, to open healthy, kind conversations about mental illness and mental-health treatment options.

THE ILLNESS

Bipolar disorder (formerly called manic-depressive illness or manic depression) is a mental illness that causes unusual shifts in mood, energy, activity levels, concentration, and the ability to carry out day-to-day tasks. Bipolar is characterized by manic episodes, depressive episodes, or a “mixed state” with qualities of both mania and depression. During manic episodes, people may have a sense of intense joy, excitement, or euphoria, have little need for sleep, take on more new projects than they can handle, talk very fast, or participate in impulsive or high-risk behaviors (e.g., spending sprees, gambling, unwise investments, and otherwise unsafe behaviors). During depressive episodes, people may have problems with concentration, decision-making, or forgetfulness, experience significant weight loss or gain, feel fatigued with no energy,

have feelings of worthlessness, experience suicidal ideation or attempt suicide, and have difficulty sleeping or sleep too much. Mixed States involve symptoms of both mania and depression, making it a uniquely dangerous state. (DSM-5) (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th edition)

Bipolar disorder seeps into every aspect of one's life. It is a sneaky illness that constantly seeks paths around the medication used for its treatment. It is an ongoing battle to stay in front of it and to stay healthy. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, it is estimated that more than one in five Americans lives with a mental illness. Kindness, empathy, and compassion are the name of the game here.

THE MUSIC

The Electronic/Technology Daytime Showcase Concert will feature a complete performance of "is this madness?" The electronic/technological component makes the piece effective. Audience members get a small glimpse into what it is like to *feel* the desperation and depths of darkness as well as the highs of mania.

In the interview with Carly, she reflects on her reality with bipolar disorder. She speaks of deep, "black depression," struggles with suicide, manic spending sprees, a psychotic break from reality, and what unfolded for her as a multi-year process of finding the proper diagnosis and medication combination. This interview with Carly became the basis for the composition. Audio clips from the interviews are embedded throughout the composition along with the accompanying electronic track. The title of the work and the titles of the movements are all based on quotes from the interviews with Carly as well: I. *I can't speak...*; II. *dipping your toes into madness...*; III. *black...*; IV. *waiting to feel the sun again*; V. *be kind to yourself*.

After being asked to compose the work, Joe talks about listening to and reflecting on the interview for inspiration. "I aimed to convey the feelings, moods, and emotions discussed through music,

and I believed incorporating the dialogue from the interview would best achieve this, so I requested permission to use portions of it in the fixed media. Additionally, I included some of the interview text to be spoken by the performer and incorporated a doctor-patient communication scenario."

THE RESULT

I commissioned Joe to write this piece because I needed someone I could trust to handle the subject matter respectfully. He far exceeded my expectations and imagination bringing this piece to fruition. I asked for a compact multi-percussion piece, and I received a near 20-minute work that stretched me as a theatrical percussionist, performer, and person. Joe's incorporation of the interview clips into the audio track and my live speaking has woven together a piece that conjures a visceral response from both performer and listener.

The audio track incorporates the clips from the interview with Carly, my own voice, and the voice of a psychiatrist. The voices are overlapped in the audio track and live performance – at times, effectively masking whose voice we are supposed to hear. I think this brilliantly captures a part of what I understand about bipolar disorder: are these thoughts my own, my illness's, or someone else's entirely?

Performing this piece requires such a commitment to emotional authenticity, resulting in this piece being the most emotionally taxing performing I have done to date. In preparation for performance, I build in extra time for mental rest to protect my own headspace. As you watch the Virtual Session, I hope that my commitment not just to portraying the emotions but *feeling* them as my own, shines through.

Carly: "I was lucky to be able to attend the world premiere of all five movements of "is this madness?" in 2017. I do not know what I expected, but this exceeded it. Joe brings bipolar disorder to life so hauntingly with the vibraphone

chords and thrilling drumming combined with the unexpected acting and voices. Watching Kathryn perform this piece is very emotional for me. It's like watching part of my soul being performed on the outside of my body."

Joe: "The process of composing this work was informative and eye-opening, making me a better person. It taught me to be more considerate of everyone's life experiences and to have even greater empathy for those of us who are dealing with mental health conditions."

BE KIND TO YOURSELF

It is important to remember that when you or someone you know is suffering from a mental health crisis, these are symptoms of an illness. *Symptoms can be treated.*

You are not alone. Help is available. You deserve it.

988: Suicide and Crisis Hotline

Crisis Text Line: Text HOME to 741741 from anywhere in the United States, anytime.

1-800-662-HELP (4357) SAMHSA (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration)

Kathryn Irwin is a performer and educator from Petal, Mississippi. She is the Assistant Professor of Percussion at the University of Louisiana Monroe School of Visual and Performing Arts. Kathryn's primary teachers include Gwendolyn Dease, Jon Weber, Ji Hye Jung, and Brett William Dietz. She is president of the Louisiana PAS Chapter. **PN**