

# Alia



I'm Alia. I'm loud and I'm fun, so a lot of people assume I'm just this ditzy White girl. I actually have this awesome multicultural background – my mom's White and grew up overseas, my step-dad's Black, and my Arab dad is married to a Chinese woman. My wedding photos are going to be phenomenal! Although I'm White-passing, I still live with the gnarly stigma of being Middle Eastern. Like, we all smell. Or, we're all terrorists. And if you're covered, then you're automatically just an awful person.

And that ditziness? I'm bipolar. Some people use that term loosely, like somebody does something destructive or is just a jerk and people say, "Oh, they must be bipolar." I hate when people say that. Other people think that being bipolar just means you're psychotic or you're crazy. But bipolar is a condition where a person has extremes in emotions, thoughts and behaviors.

You know how you feel when you're four years old and you're going to Disneyland the next day and you can't sleep at night? That's how I can feel all day long. Like, I

*I think it's frowned upon to have a mental illness. There's this stigma that it's wrong to get help, and that it's wrong to figure out what's wrong with you. We don't want to feel like we're crazy. But, we all have a little crazy in us. Some of us have just had a doctor tell us what kind of crazy we are.*

just bought ChapStick and it's the most exciting thing in the world. I have so much energy, I can run ten miles.

And then the ChapStick melts all over my purse, and it's the worst day ever. All of a sudden I'm physically tired, I have zero patience, I hate everybody. I don't even have the energy to brush my teeth. I dwell on it, and obsess on it, and think about it, and it just eats me alive.

I must have been eight or nine when I started to think that something was different about me. I remember my friends would study, and they'd say, "Oh, I'm gonna ace this test." And I'm like, "I'm gonna shit my pants, I'm so scared." I knew all the answers, but the pressure and that anxiety in the moment would make my stomach churn, and I'd start shaking and sweating.

Growing up, doctors misdiagnosed me over and over. I was like a guinea pig for them. "Well, she does this, so she must be OCD. Well, she does that, so she must be ADD. Well, that obviously isn't working, so let's try her with ADHD medication." And they were literally telling me that I was going to go absolutely nowhere and become a drug addict that lives on the street. This was coming from professionals.

Everything the doctors did and said to me they thought was helping me. But, it just did damage growing up. They kept giving me the wrong medications, and eventually I just started to self-medicate. I got heavily into drugs. It was like, finally, I'd found something that made



The therapist who diagnosed Alia told her, “Despite what others have told you in the past, you can choose your path.” She bought Alia beads in Greece and told her, “This is a representation of you wanting to be better.” Alia recalls, “At the time I was 13 and like, ‘What are these?’ As I got older, I thought it was such a cool thing that she thought of me on her vacation. And they remind me that you can always turn things around.”

Beads given to Alia as a gift from a cousin who visited Palestine. They remind her of beads (since misplaced) given to her by the therapist who first diagnosed her with bipolar disorder.

me feel good about myself. But then I started thinking, “This is what the doctor said was going to happen ...”

When I was seventeen, I got sober. And then from there, I became determined to prove everybody wrong. Since then I’ve always had this thought process like, “I can beat it, I don’t need the medication,” and then I go off my medications and I crash and burn. If it was up to me I wouldn’t take pills, but I know now that this is what I need to function and not to feel emotionally drained.

I think that there are a lot of people out there who are mentally ill but they don’t even know it, because there is a lot of stigma in being diagnosed. People need to know that it’s okay if you see a shrink. And it’s okay if medication helps you to focus.

It is also important for parents to help their children to feel normal about any mental health issues they are experiencing. I had a good support system and a mother who advocated for me. And if the circumstances were otherwise, maybe I would have gone a totally

different route. And although a lot of people have reservations, yes, medication is sometimes necessary. But, also don’t just start jamming pills down their throat.

I don’t know that being bipolar is this awful thing. It’s not like, “So exciting! Bipolar!” But I think, at the end of the day, you need to find the good. I’m more creative than most. I’m intelligent in a totally different way. I also get to feel *deeper* than other people. Some of it is heart-wrenching sadness, and then there’s that other side where I also feel pure bliss and pure joy.

I normally don’t tell anybody my issues, so this is difficult for me. But, if I can impact one person, and let them know it’s okay to feel this way, and it’s okay to be this way, and you can prove to the world that you can still be successful, then this is what I need to do, to be that reassurance.