Health through movement

How Nia changed my life

BY JENNIFER HICKS

After 34 years living in my body, I became an expert. That is, an expert in myself. And I discovered, after all that time, that I am not ordinary.

I have bipolar disorder. But that's not what makes me different. I am unique because of how I have learned to manage my bipolar disorder. Yes, I need medication and psychotherapy, but there's more to my wellness plan. I use Nia—a fitness practice which not only offers me physical fitness, but also a lifestyle, and now a profession.

Looking at me, you'd never know I have a mental health issue. Spend a little bit of time with me and you still likely wouldn't guess. Ask my family or friends about its impact on my life, and they probably wouldn't be able to pinpoint anything "abnormal." In fact, people would actually describe me as engaged, ambitious and driven. Looking at me from the outside, this mental illness thing appears to be rather invisible in my life.

Still, appearances, as they say, are deceiving. I do swing between abnormally elevated and depressed moods.

It's difficult for folks to appreciate the considerable amount of energy I use every single day to level out my moods. It's an ongoing struggle for me to suppress extreme impulses and urges. If I am not vigilant, my actions and behaviour can fluctuate drastically. Yet despite my best efforts, sometimes my moods are not always in my control. Some days I can do the work of 10 people and other days I'm immobilized in bed 23 hours a day.

My psychiatrist calls the 'ups' hypomania. I think of myself as being hyperfunctional when my mood is up; I'll feel extremely energetic, creative, outgoing and won't need as much sleep. These times can be precarious, though, in that I am also more impulsive, less inhibited, take more risks and am less self-aware because of the mildly euphoric quality of my mindset.

The 'downs' are less fun and are always sure to closely follow a period of increased productivity. These episodes seem to appear out of the blue, completely unrelated to what's happening in my life. Everything might be going perfectly well and then, in an instant, it feels like someone has flicked a switch in my brain which turns on serious distress. This is not the normal depression everyone experiences from time to time. It's not as if I can just "think" or "deep breathe" myself out of it. This is a deep, heavy sense of dread that is accompanied by a paralyzing, numbing fatigue. I can spend days at a time in bed, feeling hopeless and experiencing an insatiable desire to find satisfaction and pleasure. Nothing other than sleep seems to relieve the aching sadness and bewildering emotional pain.

Nonetheless, chances are, you still would be really surprised if I told you I had bipolar disorder. Why? I think it's because I've become really skilled at funneling my excessive and stagnant energy states into a productive focus. Into Nia. My frightening mental health crisis actually introduced me to my body's own mood stabilizer: The Nia Technique.

Mopo Art

Jennifer Hicks at Toronto's 2009 "Taste of the Danforth," leading a NIA class on stage.

And how did I discover this innate mood stabilizer? I believe that it's because as I was searching for wellness, I was drawn to creative remedies. I was open to experiences that helped me feel more at home in myself. And so I was led to Nia. My secret to maintaining stability in my life is through the combination of music, movement and magic that Nia offers me. After years of battling the unidentified thief of my sanity, I reinvented my life and my body through dance, through Nia.

At the age of 30, my life started to unravel. I found myself spinning into a dangerous habit of over exercising and under eating. I was five years into my career as a Speech-Language Pathologist and had just been married. I lived in a beautiful home, had great friends and a supportive and loving family. On the outside, everything was perfect. But there was a storm brewing within.

At first it felt like extreme anxiety, nervousness; a sensation deep in my gut that I couldn't shake. It seemed to help to exercise. Soon, the anxiety was so overpowering that it fueled endlessly frenzied workouts. I would exercise up to eight hours a day; in the middle of the night, early mornings before work, on my lunch breaks, most of the evening, even in the car while driving. I had infinite amounts of energy. At the time I recall being quite proud of myself because of my creative ability to squeeze so much exercise into my day while working both a full-time and a part-time job.

In those days, spending time with my husband or friends meant that either we had exercise dates or we didn't see one another. At the time, I didn't see the oddity in my behaviour and everyone seemed so concerned about keeping an eye on me that they didn't mention it. I guess they wanted to avoid upsetting me.

Over time, my eating habits changed drastically. I restricted whole food groups from my diet and drank unimaginably large quantities of water. Eventually I was diagnosed with an eating disorder—some called it anorexia, others called it exercise bulimia. All I knew was that I had become afraid of food and was unable to stop exercising.

I continued working as a Speech-Language Pathologist but my behaviour radically changed. I began shoplifting, hoarding food and clothing, dressing like a 12 year old, sleeping on the front porch, acting inappropriately towards my husband in public, and engaging in self harm. I hated myself, felt deep shame about my body, and was angry, scared and out of control.

Eventually my self-care plummeted, I stopped showering and finally I was asked to leave work. After seeing at least six psychiatrists, I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder. Hearing that diagnosis offered such relief. Finally there was a medical explanation for my feelings and unusual behaviour. The diagnosis was my first step towards recovery.

Humiliation and guilt were my first reactions to my dismissal from work. That changed when, about six months into my medical leave from work, I found Nia.

Nia is an invigorating cardiovascular fitness program combining dance, martial arts and healing arts. Because it encourages participants to move according to the way our bodies are designed, the experience feels good rather than feeling forced or painful. Nia is joyful, energizing and empowering, a stimulating fitness experience where commands like "work harder" are replaced with suggestions like "fly" and "drum on the earth." At first, I didn't understand what my Nia teacher meant when she said "All pleasure, no pain." I was so used to "feeling the burn." But over time, Nia taught me that I could exchange the pain I'd experienced in my previous workouts for smiles, pleasure and laughter.

At this point, you may be thinking that this is a little peculiar. A woman with an exercise obsession becoming preoccupied with another fitness practice? Absurd. My family and friends, psychotherapist and doctors were likewise skeptical. Even though I was taking a risk by introducing more exercise into my life, there was something in me that felt right about this. I was riding on a major instinct; going against what would be considered "good judgment" by declining a hospital admission so I wouldn't miss my Nia class. Following my inner knowing was the beginning of me gaining expertise in the subject of me!

Nia satisfied my craving for exercise, but taught me that fitness and wellness is about being kind to one's body, finding joy and accessing one's spirit. Through Nia, I learned not only about physical fitness, but also about fitness of my mind, spirit and emotions. Nia broke my obsession with painful exercise, improved my body image and was the major catalyst towards dismantling my eating disorder. Because of the practice of moving my body to create pleasure, Nia taught me about self-compassion and has allowed me to be fully present during physical activity.

This gift of health through movement named Nia had invited herself into my life and soon enough began begging me to share her with my world.

So, in 2006 I trained to become an instructor. For the last four years, I have been studying and teaching Nia. In that time, I have watched my self-confidence swell and have strengthened my ability to cope with the ebb and flow of my mood. I find balance, creativity and healthy expressive outlets through my daily practice and work with students. Nia is an integral part of my wellness plan, and makes me feel like a dancer and a lover of my body. In many ways Nia saved my life, helped me burst into my creative self and now has given me a business to nurture and grow.

So, yes, I am an expert in me. And it's because I listen to and trust my ability to make choices that are best for me.

Ironically, my recovery process brought me full circle. I started out with an exercise addiction and now use exercise as part of my wellness plan. Difference is, Nia has taught me how to love my whole self; to respect, nurture and move not only my body, but also my mind, emotions and spirit. The principles I've learned through Nia help me monitor and navigate my moods in a healthy way.

Because I have bipolar disorder I found Nia. As a result, I have the tools to cope with the ups and downs. Indeed, I am extraordinary.

Jennifer Hicks is a Brown Belt Nia Instructor in Toronto, Canada. Teaching high energy, dynamic and free-spirited Nia classes is her passion. Leading by example, Jennifer inspires her students to jump right in and make the most of themselves. Jennifer also maintains a private Speech-Language Pathology practice working with adults recovering from brain injury, stroke and other neurological issues.