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**STIGMA:
ATTITUDES TOWARD MENTAL ILLNESS CAN PROVE FATAL**

By Lana R. Castle

I killed my sister Barbara. And my mother, father and other two sisters helped. As did most everyone in our society. In some small way, we all played a part in Barbara's death.

One August day, after cheerfully sending her husband off to work, Barbara picked up a gun and ended her life. But what really killed her well before she pulled that trigger was the stigma of having a mental illness.

Barbara had bipolar illness (manic depression). A mood disorder that sends you on a roller coaster ride from elation and euphoria to darkness and despair. Sometimes, it shows up as anger or pronounced irritability.

I can't say precisely what drove Barbara to suicide. But I can identify with her pain. I can tell you – to some extent – what this illness feels like, because I have it, too.

A manic episode often begins with a pleasant state called hypomania (mild mania), in which you are optimistic, creative and productive. You don't feel sick at all. You feel fantastic! You barely need to sleep. You are charismatic and fun to be around.

But then you begin to lose control. Your thoughts come too fast to capture. Your brain feels as if it is spinning and simply won't slow down. You become confused and lose your sense of judgment. You act impulsively. You may max out your credit cards buying things you never will use. Make ludicrous investments. Or become sexually promiscuous.

Then something plunges you into deep depression. You become sad and tearful. You no longer care about a thing. You may starve yourself or eat everything in sight. You may have so little energy that all you can do is sleep – or so much distress that you barely can.

Your self-esteem plummets. You feel worthless and guilty, even if you are highly accomplished and you have done nothing wrong. You may become obsessed with death and attempt suicide. As many as one-fifth of those with the illness eventually take their lives.

Bipolar illness can paint a pretty grim picture. But it is highly treatable. The National Depressive and Manic-Depressive Association says a substantial number of those who seek treatment for bipolar illness eventually loosen its grip.

It often takes a while to get an accurate diagnosis, but it is time well spent. With the right combination of medication, therapy, diet, exercise, sleep and stress reduction, most of us lead productive, even extraordinary, lives.

But this illness all too often goes undiagnosed and undertreated.

Bipolar illness is much like other chronic illnesses that require lifetime medication and lifestyle changes, such as diabetes, epilepsy or heart disease. But instead of going into a diabetic coma or having a seizure or a heart attack, those of us with bipolar illness have “brain attacks.” In between, most of us lead fairly normal lives.

Things are getting better for those of us with mental illness. We no longer must live out our lives in institutions or chained in dungeons. But myths and stigma still prevail.

A mere five years ago, a National Mental Health Association survey found that 71 percent of our population still believes that character flaws or emotional weakness causes mental illness, 65 percent blames bad parenting, and 35 percent blames immoral behavior. Mental illness still is sorely misunderstood.

It is time to go after the real culprit — the stigma of mental illness. It is time to become more knowledgeable, more compassionate, more understanding. It is time to treat mental illnesses just as we treat other physical illnesses. It is time for you to learn more about mental illness, to offer your assistance or to get the help you need yourself.

Without such changes, Barbaras of all ages will continue to lose their lives.

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Technically Write

December 1991

You Are At Risk For OSA!

by Lana R. Castle

Alcoholism, drug abuse, and other addictive disorders get lots of press these days, but one serious addiction—that's particularly threatening to writers—has been *blatantly ignored*. This insidious syndrome can ruin your relationships, wreck your writing career, even threaten your very existence. The vicious antagonist? Office Supply Addiction (OSA). Once seduced into OSA's snare, your mind gets saturated with thoughts of digital-readout postal scales and nifty electric staplers, and you begin ignoring all impending deadlines!

Unless you're totally oblivious, the problem can't be ignored. Due to the explosive growth of discount supply warehouses, the incidence of OSA has skyrocketed. Those tempting havens crammed with merchandise are magnets for OSA infestations. The outlets swarm with OSA sufferers stealthily caressing file cabinets, fondling fax machines, and inhaling the sensual bouquet of vinyl binders. Victims roam shops in glassy-eyed hordes, arms bulging with bubble-lined disk mailers. And most locations boldly stock the "hard stuff"—executive desks, plus rolling chairs, and fancy paper shredders.

What causes this horrible malady, and how can it be stopped? As with most addictions, parents are clearly to blame. Addictive disorders almost always stem from cold, uncaring parents and rotten dysfunctional families. Most cases of OSA began as childhood fixations on school supplies. When unmet, these needs became insatiable. In other cases, overindulgent, self-absorbed, or co-dependent parents seeded OSA by *not even questioning* their child's daily "fixes" of designer folders. It's a national disgrace!

Could OSA be hereditary or perhaps even biochemical? Sadly, a lack of research funding leaves this question unanswered. In the bold new publication, *Writers Who Love Office Supplies and the Agents Who Dump Them*—the only book addressing this disorder—researcher Igotta B. Pubblesht links OSA to other maladies writers commonly experience: Deadline Anxiety Disorder, Serial Comma Syndrome, and Appendixitis. Untreated OSA can lead to even costlier disorders: Laser Printer Lust and Copier Craving.

For OSA sufferers, the temptations are increasingly difficult to avoid. With aisle after aisle of expandable folders, rainbows of vinyl-coated paper clips, and writing implements of every kind, what writer stands a chance? Merely staying away from these outlets won't do: glossy catalogs and mail-order options make a "fix" just a phone call away. In a society obsessed with materialism, it's no wonder OSA victims cave in.

For years, the uninformed have equated OSA with moral weakness, but OSA sufferers are beginning to fight the stigma at last. With education, confrontation, and support, writers with OSA can finally regain control.

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LANA,
Thank you for allowing us to
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Maurice Thompson

SUMMER 1983: Pressured by competitors (clubs that serve as meeting grounds for singles), Gym & Swim goes coed. Less than thrilled, I put up with the deep grunts of macho weight lifters as I press through my routine.

When Gym & Swim goes out of business, my "lifetime membership" gets transferred to the elegant Butt & Gutt. The pool at the new place, a hole in the wall at a shopping strip, is barely larger than my tub. The clogged shower drains hold in icky, scummy water. I miss the reek of eucalyptus. My attendance wavers.

Butt & Gutt's aerobics room is separate from the rest of the facility. I go out of the way to continue my voyeurism. Nose pressed against the studio window, I imagine performing the movements. The time has not arrived.

FALL 1985: I've clearly been avoiding Butt & Gutt. I invest in a membership at Health Haven. It's clean, spacious, well kept—a welcome change. I know I've slipped lately, but I'm still deflated when my coach proclaims that I'm in "poor condition."

I up my workouts to three a week. Pedaling the stationary bicycle, I watch the aerobics folks spring across the floor. The layered look is definitely in here: Several women wear snug little bottom pieces over their tights, which have all the charm of diapers.

Things get hectic at work. I put in more and more overtime. This fitness program is excessive, I tell myself. I can't risk my job for it, can I? I decide to cut back a bit, and then all but stop exercising. I sink into dark depression, and my husband persuades me to get back to the basics.

SUMMER 1986: I get back into my old routine and reconsider aerobics. Perhaps I can memorize the movements before trying them in public. I take a giant step and buy aerobics shoes—the least expensive style in case things don't work out.

FALL 1987: Finally I work up the nerve to pack myself into a leotard and enter the beginner's class. How bad can it be? I'll stay through one song, and then work my way up. I weave my way through rows of people, trying to find an inconspicuous spot. Taking a place in the back row, I force a smile and try to blend in.

"MY NAME IS DEBI, AND THIS IS AN ENTRY-LEVEL, BEGINNER'S CLASS," belows the perky, pixielike instructor. "I'LL DEMONSTRATE BOTH LOW- AND HIGH-IMPACT MOVEMENTS. TAKE IT AT YOUR OWN PACE." (As if I had any other choice!) We start with stretches accompanied by disco music. I live through the warm-up and decide to stay a while.

We move on to the aerobics. Things get more intense. I have trouble hearing Debi's

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THE ANATOMY OF AN EROBICS FICIONADA

mere decade ago, had I been told I'd not only be taking aerobics, but (get this) actually looking forward to it, I would have replied, "Oh, get outta here!" My anxiety about physical activity went back at least to kindergarten. I had felt ridiculous marching around playing little percussion instruments. At the age of seven, my dream of being a famous ballerina had been promptly punctured when I wound up stranded on a different side of the stage than my recital partner. And since junior high P.E., when I had been forced into a blousey, puke-green gym suit, I had been sensitive about my size.

Since high school, doctors had needled me to exercise and shed a few pounds. I had struggled repeatedly with starvation diets and made noble attempts to exercise—and failed. When my health began to falter, I finally forked over an exorbitant amount to a health club so I'd be racked by guilt if I didn't go. Here's how my adventures in exercise unfolded:

SPRING 1980: I start by joining Gym & Swim. The club has certain days for women and certain days for men, a policy I appreciate, because I'm shy enough working out in front of women. Gym & Swim reminds me of the spa Mother dragged me to when I was in high school—one more failed attempt to get me to exercise. The odor of eucalyptus, which the club pumps into the sauna to cleanse our respiratory systems, permeates everything—even the parking lot.

My twice-a-week routine begins with pedaling a stationary bicycle (set to low speed and reduced pressure). I try to ignore the aerobics class bouncing across the floor in front of me. Aerobics strikes me as a strange native ceremony, complete with pulsing drumbeats. I force myself through a chain of weight machines, do some floor exercises, then indulge in my reward—a leisurely soak in a scorching hot whirlpool, followed by a dip in the pool.

SPRING 1982: After two years of faithful visits, my weight's about the same, but my body tone has dramatically improved. My breasts have acquired a pleasant firmness, and my pants have slightly loosened their strangehold on my thighs. While pedaling the bicycle (still set to low speed and reduced pressure), I begin watching the ladies in the aerobics class as they bounce by. I'm fascinated by their colorful garb (complete with matching leg warmers and sweatbands). They seem to be having fun, but I can't imagine doing it myself.

BY LANA CASTLE

And I get a kick out of the petite brunette who violently slams her feet into the floor, and then springs way off the ground and throws in high kicks as flourishes.

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instructions above the throbbing drumbeats and nearly collide with the person on my right. It's amazing how similar "kick" and "back" and "right" sound when shouted over blaring music.

"SUCK IN THOSE ABS," Debi yells, staring directly at me. The first routine leaves me panting and gasping, even though I managed a tenth of the moves. We stop for ten seconds to measure our heart rates. Debi points to a complex-looking matrix on the wall. "YOUR TARGET RATE SHOULD BE 60 TO 70 PERCENT," she shouts. My veins are so deeply recessed, I can't find a pulse.

With fierce concentration, I lock my eyes on Debi's feet. I scrutinize her every step and try to move in the same direction. "SHIFT YOUR WEIGHT FROM SIDE TO SIDE," she hollers. "BEND YOUR KNEES MORE AND RAISE YOUR ARMS HIGH TO BRING YOUR HEART RATE UP." We check our heart rates again. I finally find my pulse. "IF YOU'RE OVER 70 PERCENT YOU'RE BURNING MUSCLE, NOT FAT," Debi warns. I scan the matrix, which ranges from 55 to 85 percent. My rate's about 115 percent. I panic and envision myself a muscleless blob.

I'm so sore I skip the next three classes. Instead, I ride the bicycle and congratulate myself for getting to the spa at all. When I return to aerobics, the value of gradual progression is planted firmly in my mind. I add one routine each session. A veteran mouth breather, I'm cottony dry when each song ends. Frequent trips to the water fountain keep me going. So what if I miss a few beats here and there?

I'm catching on to Debi's patterns: Step out right, step out left, step in right, step in left, lift right knee, lift left knee. "OUT, OUT, IN, IN, KNEE, KNEE," she chants. Out, out, in, in, knee, knee. Not so bad. Then, just when I've got it down, she switches to out, out, in, in, OUT, OUT, IN, IN, knee, knee, and I get totally flustered.

Debi introduces a new combination that incorporates a twisting motion. I try to rotate on the balls of my feet and find them firmly

stuck to the floor. My ankles ache from the effort. I invest in shoes with better support—virgin white high-tops that make my feet look enormous. I feel like Minnie Mouse.

WINTER 1988: I make it through my first full class (meaning I stayed the entire hour, not that I managed every movement). Sweat pours down my reddened face and stings my eyes. I resolve to buy my first sweatband. After class, a woman in the locker room quips, "You're really improving. You were hysterical when you first started!" So much for anonymity.

Our class waits outside the club's new aerobics room while the advanced group wraps up. How can they move so fast! When the door opens, we're blasted by heat as trim, sweaty bodies file by. These people are exhibitionists. Several ladies wear little G-string gadgets over their tights, and the instructor sports something resembling a lace teddy.

Inside, surrounded by wall-to-wall mirrors, I catch my first solid glimpse of my pear-shaped image in aerobics attire. My thighs look like sausages encased in the form-fitting tights. I line up my body with the strip of wall between mirrors to keep my reflection out of view.

Aerobics is becoming second nature. I'm gaining confidence. Exhilarated by my progress, in the kitchen I show my stepson how I can lift my knees clear to my waist. He forces a smile and tries to seem impressed.

I breeze into the aerobics room and find someone standing in "my spot." Flooded by panic, I survey the room. The only space is right in front. I hesitate, draw a shaky breath, and then take it. From my new perspective, I can hear Debi above the drumbeats, and she's much easier to follow.

SPRING 1988: I gain some success at keeping my heart rate down. I bring my arms to chest level when others reach straight up. I avoid raising my knees too high or bending them too deep. Sometimes I keep my hands on my hips and work my legs alone.

Now that I'm more comfortable, I catch the music's lyrics. Their irony amuses me: "I'm a love addict. I'm addicted to you." I keep entertained by analyzing classmates. One lady (whom I've cast as an accountant) wears a wide array of expensive-looking outfits and absolutely drips with gold jewelry. She brings in special hand weights and an elastic gadget to loop around her ankles when we do leg lifts on our sides. I begin appreciating coed classes. (There's one guy with gorgeous calves!) And I get a kick out of the petite brunette who violently slams her feet into the floor, and then springs way off the ground and throws in high kicks as flourishes.

I feel more energetic than ever, almost light on my feet. One day, while watching the escapades of the "slammer," I get in-

spired. I add some bounce to my performance, raise my knees sharper, kick higher, let both feet actually clear the ground. I can take that slight twinge in my ankles. I'm tough. I'm athletic. I'm finally over my awkwardness. Nothing can stop me now!

Later, in the emergency room, I receive a pair of crutches. As the swelling migrates from right ankle to left knee to right knee to left ankle over the following weeks, I feel like a balloon animal being squeezed. I prop up my legs as much as possible and apply the heating pad.

SUMMER 1988: After a few months of pampering, I cautiously return to class, thoroughly swaddled in elastic bandages. Debi has changed the music and some of the routines, but I manage to pick them up. I take great pains to avoid bouncing, quick changes and high-energy kicks. When the rest of the class jogs in place, I rise up on the balls of my feet rather than swing my legs behind me. When they do jumping jacks, I do one-sided "half-jacks," keeping arms at chest level and delicately tapping my foot to the side. Maybe I can't put much bounce into it or really let myself go, but that doesn't have to stop me entirely.

FALL 1988: Debi's taken a job in the "real world," and although she still teaches, we have frequent substitutes while she's on business trips. I've now adjusted to numerous instructors—one who's so laid back even I keep up with every movement, one who changes moves so fast that none of us can and a third who does exaggerated lip syncs to the music and punctuates the air with her unrestrained whoops.

SPRING 1989: We learn a new combination, done to a Sixties melody. I get into the music. I'm much less bashful these days. I don't even avoid my reflection anymore. I envision myself "twisting the night away" at my upcoming high school reunion while former classmates stand in awe.

I now make it easily through the whole beginner's class (albeit doing only low-impact moves at an abbreviated pace). I've noticed some newcomers who stand out almost as much as I must have, which is reassuring. I can't help but be particularly fond of one poor lady who's always a beat behind.

JANUARY 1990: Debi dredges up a tune she hasn't used in ages. I'm surprised to recall the whole routine, and I'm struck by its lyrics: "a little battle that can be won—mind over matter." Aerobics now seems quite natural. I feel accepted, even welcomed, by the others. And although it's unlikely I'll ever be slim or graceful, I'm feeling healthy and proud. □

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TECHNICAL WRITER...NO, ROMANCE WRITER...
NO — EDITOR... WAIT! NOVELIST...
MAYBE, INVESTIGATIVE REPORTER...
I KNOW! GENERALIST!



On Self-Definition, Creativity, and Being Boxed In

by Lana R. Castle

Getting involved in the Austin Writers' League has brought me face-to-face with *sheer terror* because few words provoke more anxiety for me than that old standard, "What kind of writing do you do?" This question always throws me. I had 12 "specialties" at last count. What do I say? How do I compress all I want to be into one neat little package? I'm resistant to being "type cast," yet I'm haunted by the old quip, "Jack of all trades, master of none." I agonize over the flip advice, "Just decide what you want and then go for it." The trouble is I want so much—where do I begin?

But when someone pops the question, I take a deep breath and babble, "Well, in the 'real world' I do a lot of editing..." Cheeks flushing, I continue, "I work on a lot of medical publications..." Then when the "Editor" label (or perhaps even "Medical Editor") pops into my companion's eyes, I

sputter, "But on my own time, I'm working on some very different projects." My audience is taken back, appears confused, almost offended. My hands begin to sweat as I rattle on, "I've been trying to market an article on ..." A spark of interest materializes, my new friend begins to nod, and hairs leap up on the back of my neck. I want to grab the inquirer and shriek, "No, wait! I'm not just that kind of writer!" I panic and stammer, "I'm also starting a new..." The poor person's face transforms into a puzzled grin, and I feel like a fool.

The problem is compounded by my finding almost everything associated with the Writers' League so damned stimulating. When I go to League events, I get this driving impulse to start new projects. Creative energies pulse through my veins, and I get all manic about life. I get so high I must actually sedate myself to keep my crazy muse from

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Boxed In (from p.1)

savagely pulling me out of bed!

Perhaps this merely means I'm immature, irresponsible, uncommitted, and/or self-indulgent—that I live by avoidance and denial, or that I'm just not a risk-taker. Or, of course, it could just mean I'm neurotic. (But isn't a little bit of neurosis essential to the artistic temperament?) My muse definitely has multiple personalities.

Indecision has been a perpetual presence in my life. Mother said I lacked "stick-to-it-iveness." In college, I switched majors half a dozen times, and by the time I reached 35, I had had several "new careers." I guess I get bored once I've grasped some new skill and no longer find life a struggle.

Lately I've come to view all this in a different light. Suppose that indecision merely reflects one's creativity. Once when I was ranting and raving about this problem, my husband said, "They say our greatest gift is often our greatest weakness." Maybe he's got something there. Could indecisiveness be a sign of creative resistance to being boxed in and labeled, rather than an awful shortcoming or terrible character flaw?

I was also relieved when, in a recent workshop, Peggy Fielding relayed an anecdote about Isaac Asimov moving down a line of twelve typewriters, with a different work in progress in each one. That makes my situation much more palatable.

I'm always skeptical when people say they've wanted to be such-and-such as long as they could remember. How could they block out so much at such a young age? Why must I accept such limitations? What's so bad about being well-rounded?

All I really know is that I'm driven to express myself, to communicate, to create, to incite emotional responses, to enlighten, to inspire, to somehow make a difference in the world. So for now I guess I can live with the label of "Writer"—just don't force me to get more specific. *✎*

Lana Castle is a writer living in Austin and currently working on personal essays, short stories, articles on self-help, psychology, family relationships, and family camping, a book on publication style and format, a children's musical, a book on dysfunctional families, a