

CMHA HK STORYTELLING SERIES Q&A



GARETH B, A DIRECTOR AT HSBC HONG KONG

Gareth shares his personal experience of being diagnosed and living with bipolar disorder.

CMHA HK Storytelling Series

Creating Mentally Healthy Workplaces through the sharing of personal stories

The aim of the CMHA HK Storytelling Series is to educate, inspire and break down the stigma around mental health in the workplace.

Welcome Gareth, firstly thank you for sharing your personal experience with the CMHA HK community. Prior to your diagnosis of bipolar disorder in 2014 what was your life like?

I was born and raised in the UK. I was fortunate to come from a tight-knit family with a close circle of friends. I had a happy childhood and was someone who liked to enjoy life to the full. Having worked in London for 10+ years I was offered the chance to join HSBC in Hong Kong in 2013. My wife, 20-month-old daughter and I arrived here in May of that year. My mental health problems were triggered a few months after arriving in Hong Kong.

How about the period of your life when you received your diagnosis?

This was a particularly difficult period in my life. Having got through the first few months in Hong Kong on excitement and adrenaline, I was starting to struggle at work (adjusting to a new country, organisation and culture) and suffering severe bouts of home-sickness as a consequence. I had underestimated the emotional and mental impact leaving my

support network at home would have on me and felt like a failure. I was experiencing feelings of guilt, frustration, anxiety and depression which led to further fluctuations in my mood.

You managed a team of people at the time of being diagnosed. How did you inform your employer and team at the time? What was their reaction?

I didn't inform my employer at the time I was diagnosed, I was still struggling to come to terms with and accept my diagnosis and I wasn't ready to discuss my situation with anyone apart from wife and my doctor. It wasn't until 9 months after my diagnosis, in September 2015, during a particularly difficult depressive episode that my wife phoned my line manager one day and said I wouldn't be coming into the office. My line manager then told my team I would be taking a leave of absence due to 'medical reasons'.

After a leave of absence, how did your Line-Manager plan your return to the office? Looking back, could anything have been different about your return to work?

During my time off, my line manager left HSBC and my new line manager reached out to me to see how I was doing. We met for a coffee and discussed ways I might be able to return to work and be productive. My new line manager was empathetic to my situation and it was agreed that my people management responsibilities would be delegated to a colleague while I focused on working on items

that I knew I could do well and deliver on. The change in role and line manager really helped me to re-integrate into the organisation and get my career back on track. Looking back, I wouldn't have wanted to do anything differently in terms of my return to work as I was very fortunate to be able to work with a supportive and empathetic line manager who helped me get back on my feet.

What were some of the biggest challenges that you faced managing bipolar disorder in the workplace?

The biggest challenge is striking a healthy balance to maintain consistency. Bipolar is a mood disorder so there are times when I have low mood and times when my mood is elevated. This can have a direct impact on productivity and engagement. When I am suffering a depressive episode, sending an email, logging on to my laptop or even speaking to a colleague can seem like an ordeal. Conversely, when my mood is elevated I can operate at high speed, make decisions, and work on multiple initiatives at once with a high degree of confidence. Maintaining a healthy balance in mood is a constant challenge which I have to monitor on a daily basis.

What advice can you give to employers who have employees diagnosed with bipolar disorder?

Do your research, especially if you are a people manager. It is important to have a practical overview of the condition and understanding of the triggers so you can help your employee recognise when they are experiencing a change in mood if they struggle with this. It is also beneficial to work out a

plan with your employee to manage workload and stress levels as far as possible.

How about the employees themselves and their colleagues wanting to understand more? What resources or advice can you offer?

I would recommend resources such as the Mind Hong Kong website which has an A-Z of mental health disorders and Bipolar UK. Also, at HSBC we are now fortunate to work at an organisation that takes well-being seriously. We have on-line mental health courses available to all staff across the group, as well as Employee Resource Groups (ERG's) and an Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) which provide further support and guidance.

Do you see cultural differences in how mental health issues and in particular bipolar disorder are talked about?

In my experience, people from western cultures seem more prepared to speak up about mental health issues, certainly more so than a few years ago when it was much more taboo. There is still a significant stigma associated with mental health conditions which can make people reluctant to talk about their issues to family or friends, let alone to work colleagues, strangers or in public. Your own acceptance is crucial.

Why are you telling your story now / what does it mean to you to share your story?

It's been seven years since my diagnosis and I am in a good place where I am comfortable speaking about my story and my mental health experiences. If I can talk openly about this topic maybe it will encourage others who are struggling, to accept and have the confidence to seek support. If it motivates just one person to ask for help or speak to a friend or colleague it will have been worth it. My story is an example/ lesson to organisations to provide support for people with mental health conditions and provide resources to educate themselves and their staff at all levels and keeping the well-being agenda at the forefront of corporate conversations. Breaking the stigma around mental health is vital to improving awareness and understanding and ultimately making mental health conditions more manageable in the workplace and society in general. I believe it is beneficial to productivity of organisations in the long run!

The term '**bipolar**' refers to the way your mood can change between two very different states - mania and depression. If you have bipolar disorder, you are likely to have times where you experience:

- Manic or hypomanic episodes (feeling high)
- Depressive episodes (feeling low)
- Potentially some psychotic symptoms during manic or depressed episodes

People can experience three types of bipolar disorder: bipolar I, bipolar II and cyclothymic disorder.

Source: [Mind HK](#)

World Bipolar Day (WBD) is marked on 30 March 2021. It's a day for connection, outreach and coming together in solidarity around the goal of increasing awareness, acceptance and funding for bipolar disorder.

Read more [here](#).

We would like to thank our storytelling participants for sharing their personal stories with the CMHA HK community. We hope that sharing from a workplace mental health angle will help to break down the stigma that exists around mental health and wellbeing in the workplace.



City Mental Health Alliance HK

The City Mental Health Alliance Hong Kong is a collaborative venture founded by city businesses. Championed by senior leaders, the Alliance is business led and expert guided and aims to create a culture of good mental health for workers in the city of Hong Kong, share best practice and increase mental health understanding.

CONTACT

For more information, please email: info@cmhahk.org

Website: cmhahk.org

LinkedIn: [City Mental Health Alliance Hong Kong](#)