

In the } Trenches }

A Guide to Mental
Health Defense in a
Covid-19 World



SARA SCHLEY

IN THE TRENCHES: A GUIDE TO MENTAL HEALTH DEFENSE IN A COVID-19 WORLD

At first glance, when you meet me, you're likely to think I have a #bestlife, primed and ready for Instagram stories.

You'll find a successful business sustainability consultant, women's empowerment leader, and Shadow Work coach.

Since 1993, I've led large systems change initiatives at more than 50 enterprises including Nike, Ford, the Federal Government and more. EILEEN FISHER is a client of seven years.

I live on a dozen acres—organic garden, solar panels, trout stream, sugar shack -- in the woods of Western Massachusetts. We had two feet of snow this morning, and when I finish writing this, I'll strap on my skis and head out the front door for a romp. I'm a mother of grown twins, recently launched to college and have been married to a "stand-up" guy for 27 years.



Come closer though and I'll tell you this: I've suffered from a debilitating brain disorder for four decades. Like Persephone in the underworld, I have been caught in the grips of an overpowering force. For months on end, prisoner of the darkness. A relentless, burning, terror.

Twenty-five years into this struggle, I learned that I have a brain pattern known as "Bipolar II." The Roman numeral "II" here is the key distinction. Because Bipolar II presents itself clinically as "normal" depression it is mostly undiagnosed or misdiagnosed.

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The results are deadly, as the standard meds for clinical depression—SSRIs such as Prozac and Lexapro—are like poison for the Bipolar brain.

Now picture the psychiatrist who is convinced that what you have is “regular” depression. He prescribes you the poison meds and sends you off. Only to find you sicker the next time you come to his office. “More depressed,” he thinks, “let’s up your dosage of the SSRIs.” It’s a vicious cycle that could leave you psychotic, psych warded, electric shocked, suicidal or worse

Lucky for me the fifth—yes fifth—psychiatrist I found when I was hanging to this life by a thread, Dr. Michael Perlman, is an expert on the Bipolar spectrum. During my first appointment, he gave me Dr James Phelps’ Bipolar

Diagnostic Test, a simple 14-question protocol. With this tool, it took all of 20 minutes to diagnose what had eluded the medical world for a quarter century.

“We know what to do,” Dr Perlman said.

Perlman was unequivocal in his diagnosis that I had Bipolar II. This form of Bipolar disease doesn’t manifest in mania—I never had the characteristic wild highs, shopping sprees, sex adventures. But it does show up in dark, persistent, debilitating depression. And because it shares the symptoms of typical depression—low mood, weight change, loss of memory, no joy in life—it is most often diagnosed incorrectly as unipolar depression. Dr. Perlman’s clarity and the meds he prescribed, Lamictal and later Lithium, saved my life.

It also gives me empathy and insight for the millions suffering from depression of any kind and insights that I can offer here to help, especially during a time when the world’s mental wellness is under attack.



B I P O L A R I I



MENTAL HEALTH IN COVID-19 WORLD

In his December 2020 column, "The Hidden Fourth Wave of the Pandemic," New York Times Columnist Farhad Manjoo wrote about the stress impacts of Covid-19.

"America hasn't begun to face this year's mental health crisis," Manjoo wrote.

I believe he's right and by the time you read this article, sadly, thousands if not millions more people will be in crisis. For those experiencing mental challenges—and who isn't at this point—I want to offer some of what I've learned.

The tactics I advocate here have helped me save my life. But they can also help you defend from the constant barrage of attacks on our mental wellbeing even if you don't suffer from something like Bipolar II.

Pair up: Grab a Brain Buddy

Life is tough in a good year, right? What does that make this year?! It makes it critical that we have a strong defense plan in place. That starts with teaming up. Identify a "Brain Buddy." This is someone you trust fully and loves you no matter what. Contract with your Brain Buddy that when you are in crisis you will text them "Code Red." This means that they'll call you immediately (and visa versa).

With your Brain Buddy, create an affirmation for yourself that you will repeat on a regular basis. The affirmation is stated in the first person, present tense, and with feeling. For example, "I am safe, free, and loved." Or "I am loving, strong and innocent." You get the point. The important thing is that the affirmation rings true for you and gives you a sense of calm and joy.



My Five Point Defense Plan for Mental Health Challenges

From a panic attack to the long, slog days of a deep depression, to the truly crisis state that someone with a several mental health diagnosis may encounter, we need a defense plan. While these are techniques I learned in severe crisis, I encourage you to learn them and apply them to whatever your situation may be.



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Step 1

Notice what's happening in your body/emotions and give it a name that you state out loud. For example, "Self-judgement is arising." "Comparing-mind is arising." "Fear is arising." The key point here is that by stating the uncomfortable feeling as "arising" we separate it from ourselves and see it for what it is, a temporary state of mind. It does not own or define us. This three-word formula, "___ (negative emotion or sensation) is arising" works because it is simple and accessible in a moment of crisis. (Shout out to MBCT, Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy out of UMass Worcester for this approach. [You can learn more here.](#))

Step 2

When you state, "Fear (or other) is arising" that's your trigger to text your Brain Buddy, "Code Red."

Step 3

Brain Buddy calls you and states your affirmation with you out loud, slowly, several times. This calms your nervous system and lets you know, in the moment that you are not alone.

Step 4

Make a plan with your Brain Buddy for immediate next steps to get through the crisis.

Step 5

Exhale and celebrate yourself for implementing the triage plan.

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About that last step, celebration. Yes, celebrating you, the one with the unique brain pattern.

That's a counter-cultural re-frame, isn't it? Because society still errs on the side of condemning those of us with mental health challenges as less than worthy. Note I am very intentional about my word choice here. You are not your "mental illness." In other words, I don't want

you to put an equals sign between you and your diagnosis. You do have a mental health challenge to work with. It's OK, you can learn to thrive with it. I want you to make the shift from being ashamed of yourself because of your brain to being proud of what a badass survivor and thriver you are. Kick off the cloak of diminishment and get out there and dance.

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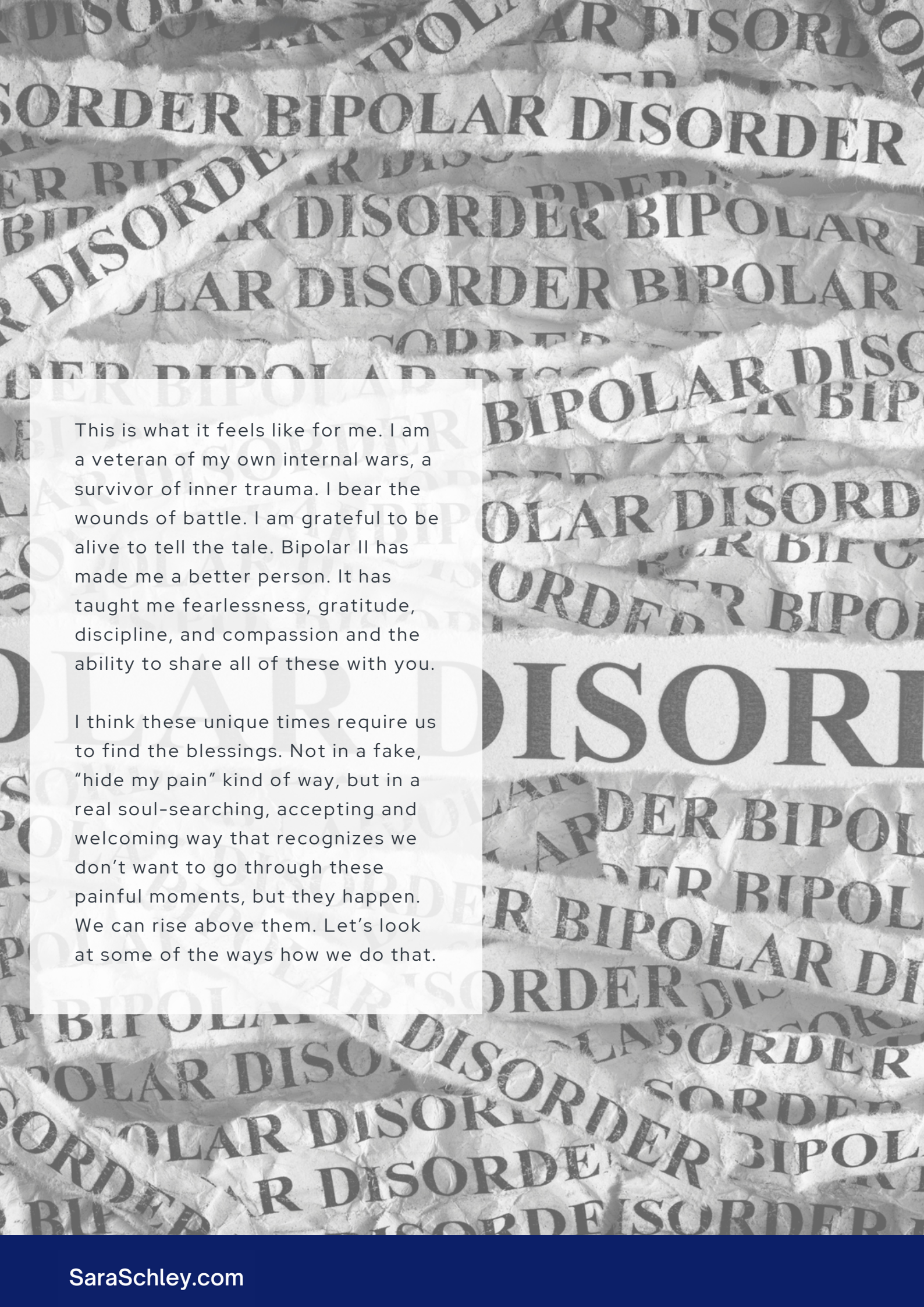
Blessings within the Brainstorm

I've recently completed a memoir called *BrainStorm: My Journey from Brutality to Blessing with Bipolar II*. As I was putting the finishing touches on the manuscript, I found myself in doubt. Was it really safe to "come out" of the Bipolar closet, shout my truth, risk the judgement of others? It was at this point that my brilliant editor and friend Dr. Jennifer Margulis, gave me the assignment to write this: "I am Bipolar and a better person because of it." What I discovered through that writing, gave me the freedom and pride to finally say "yes" to telling you my story.

Here is the truth: the disease that almost robbed me of my life has also blessed me. My Bipolar II brain has made me a better person. I am not saying that to be a Pollyanna. No, no, no. It took me 250 pages of a memoir to describe the sheer brutality of living with a broken brain, the demon that stalks hour by hour, the sadistic torturer who used to govern my nights and make my days feel like a bottomless Hell.

In some ways having Bipolar II is like being a warrior. Some soldiers don't come back. Others return with Post Traumatic Stress that they will never recover from. Some imagine suicide, and tragically many go through with it. But then there are some who emerge from the horror and brutality of their experience with a new layer of depth and compassion and sense of service. These are the survivors, the ones who are able, to counsel those who suffer as they have. Because in their bones, in their cells, they know what that feels like. They've been there. They can serve.





This is what it feels like for me. I am a veteran of my own internal wars, a survivor of inner trauma. I bear the wounds of battle. I am grateful to be alive to tell the tale. Bipolar II has made me a better person. It has taught me fearlessness, gratitude, discipline, and compassion and the ability to share all of these with you.

I think these unique times require us to find the blessings. Not in a fake, "hide my pain" kind of way, but in a real soul-searching, accepting and welcoming way that recognizes we don't want to go through these painful moments, but they happen. We can rise above them. Let's look at some of the ways how we do that.

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Living Gratitude

Imagine you wake up every day with an excruciating, immobilizing headache. Your limbs are too heavy to rise you up from your bed. The winds are whipping, freezing, icy rain. You are cold, hungry and thirsty, but there is no food or water to be found. You are chilled to your core.

Now imagine all that lifts. Your headache gone. Your limbs loose and agile. Sun is out, balmy, gentle breeze. You have fresh ample water to drink. And organic greens from your garden to nourish you.

That's the difference I'm trying to describe. And what happens, when you've emerged from that wind-whipping storm and into the bird-chirping spring? Gratitude in abundance. Gratitude like a flowing stream. Gratitude that warms your heart and overflows to those around you.

Colleagues have been surprised at my good cheer in these Covid times, (mindful that this is colored by my extreme privilege to live free and safe, with food and water and a family that I love) Why so happy? It's then that I kind of have to come out of the Bipolar closet and explain, try to

explain how this Covid is a walk in the park compared to what my brain has done to me. My brain free and clear? It's a glorious day.



This gratitude, perhaps like the virus, seems to be highly contagious. And that's a good thing. An antidepressant, a mood lifter, a force that re-orient us to the mystery wonder and awe of creation. No wonder perhaps that so many spiritual practices begin the day with thanks. An abundance of gratitude born of Bipolar II. Did I ever think, I'd say "thank you" for that?

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Exerting Discipline

If it was an AA meeting, I'm told I'd begin the meeting, "I'm Sara and I'm an alcoholic." Even if 40 years sober, it's still spoken in the present tense. Well that's how it is for me, "I'm Sara and I have a Bipolar II brain." That I know—though it took me many decades to accept—is and will be true till the day I leave this planet. I live with a healthy respect for my Bipolar Brain. It takes a lot of work, of discipline, to keep myself mentally healthy.

People who don't know my whole story will often remark, "you're so disciplined. How do you do it?"

"If you knew what was on the other side of this, you'd be too." There are diet disciplines and exercise disciplines and sleep hygiene disciplines and quality darkness and body working and mindfulness and supplement and medication

disciplines. Which I keep with the vigilance of someone who has a healthy respect for what happens when my brain is out of chemical balance. I believe I've learned to do this without the rigidity that was once there, but I am vigilant none-the-less.

How does this help me be a better leader? Well yup, leading by example. Whatever your challenge – physical, emotional, spiritual—I've probably got a tried and true and simple practice to help you transform it.



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Finding Compassion

There but for the grace of G-d go I. Absolutely. I will never judge you sitting on the cold concrete in front of our local market with your homeless sign and cup out. I'm pretty sure you've got some variation on the brain I have. It's not your fault. Our US government is Neanderthal cruel in dealing with you. And if it hadn't been for my supportive family and good medicine, I could be right where you are. This goes for pretty much

any addiction that leads to self-harm. I'm not going to judge you. You are safe with me.

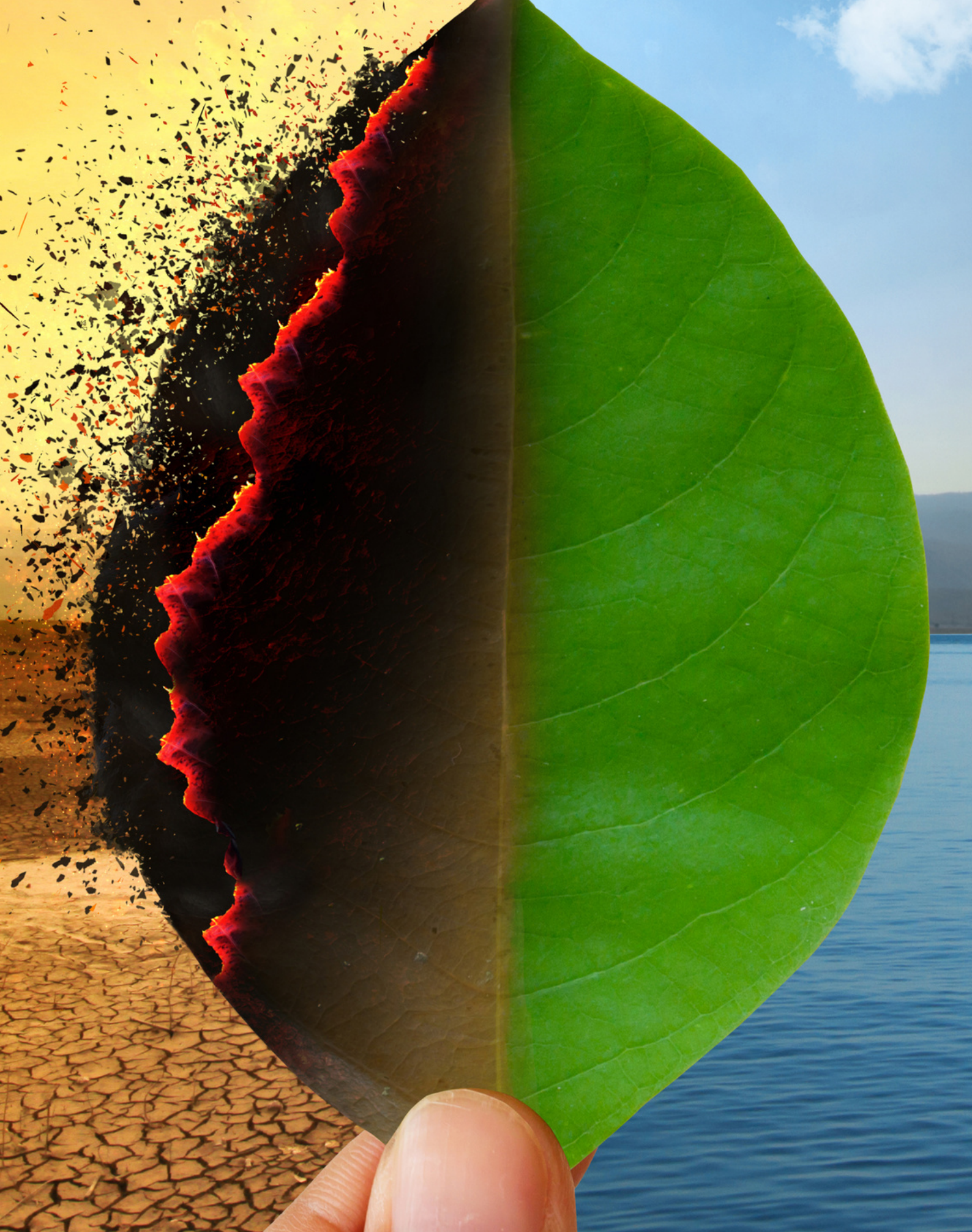
We are under attack right now. Covid-19, the reality of 2020 (and that it doesn't magically change as we dance our way into 2021), and the extreme emotional challenges we face are not to be dismissed. A fearless, disciplined, grateful and compassionate guide on a journey to the core of what it means to be human, you have here with me. You have the power to be that person, too.



A REQUEST OF YOU

My memoir BrainStorm, My Journey from Brutality to Blessing with Bipolar II which tells the full story behind this article, is presently in search of an agent or publisher. With the COVID-19 crisis generating a corollary mental health pandemic, the book is needed now more than ever. I want to see it get into the hands of everyone who can benefit: People who suffer with Bipolar II (and may not know it), their families, doctors, therapists, teachers, psychiatrists, and more. If you are moved by this story and can introduce me to an agent or publisher who can spread it far and wide, please contact me at info@saraschley.com. Let's reduce the suffering, stop the stigma, save lives.

Love, Sara



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