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What Goes Up: Surviving the Manic Episode of a Loved One

Judy Eron
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It is too late to save her husband, but the author wants others to avoid his fate. Aided in recall by her personal journal, Eron, a psychotherapist, tells a gripping story with honesty, intelligence, and humility. Few people will spend years in close quarters with a manic partner, but her successes and failures while living through what she calls the “Bad Year” have a universal resonance. The drama pulls the reader in despite—or because of—the revelation at the outset that Jim died by his own hand in 1997.

Judy, a thirty-eight-year-old social worker and songwriter married Jim, a forty-year-old psychologist, in 1987. Both had been divorced; he had two grown sons. They built a home in rural Texas and had another in Washington, and shared interests in music, nature, and reading.

Jim had a history of manic-depressive illness, going AWOL from the Army once during a manic phase, and spending many days paralyzed with depression when the tables turned. He had been on Lithium since 1983. In 1996, as the couple set off on a trip, he forgot to pack his prescription. Medicine can be a burden to many like Jim who feel more creative and energetic during a hypo-manic state, the precursor of full-blown mania. Judy did not realize the seriousness of this break in treatment, nor did the doctor on call, who sent a prescription. After two weeks, however, Jim was high enough to deny the need for medicine or therapy of any kind, and the terrible siege began.

Eron tells the story with force and grace. She loved her husband, and their relationship was strong after nine good years together. There were strains, but the couple’s resolve, idealism, and interpersonal skills helped. They were separated during most of that last year, while she hoped for the inevitable depression that might bring him back to reality. Although family and close friends recognized his illness, he hid it from casual acquaintances while avoiding serious accident or trouble with the law. Eron kept her hopes up for months, then resigned herself to the divorce he demanded. She got into therapy, finally refusing to be bullied and blamed, and started to put her life together. After several failed attempts to reconcile, there came a good reunion, with apologies from Jim. He was coming down, but his flight ended with a nosedive.

Eron shares what she learned from friends, family, therapists, the professional literature, and biographical books on this illness (Katherine Graham on her husband; Kay Redfield Jamison on herself). She gives thoughtful pointers on how to deal with one of the most difficult of psychological syndromes, showing how even the most sophisticated, strong, loving partner can be blindsided, buffeted, seduced, and defeated. Anyone in her situation will benefit from her hard-won learning, and readers who never experience such trials will find the story irresistible all the way to its bittersweet ending.

E. JAMES LIEBERMAN (August 18, 2009)

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