**Leah Charles-King transcript**

Sally and Leah MARCH 2021 LJ - DEPTH - 37 MINS

[FEMALE RESPONDENT]

[Other comments:]

**Hello and welcome to the BACP Therapy Today podcast. Today, I'm delighted to be talking to Leah** **Charles-King. Leah recently shared her experience in Therapy Today of how therapy helped her come to terms with a diagnosis of bipolar. She's also a multi-award-winning TV and radio presenter, with more than 20 years in the entertainment industry and TV credits that include BBC, ITV, Channel 5 and Sky. She is Bipolar UK's latest ambassador. Welcome Leah.**

Hi, hi, it's great to be here. Thank you for having me.

**It's really great to hear, to have you here, and I want to start by thanking you for sharing your experience in Therapy Today with us. Can we start by talking a bit about background that led up to your diagnosis?**

Yes, first of all, thank you to Therapy Today for the previous article that they featured me in, because I've had such lovely feedback actually. I've had therapists from all over sending me messages just saying thanks to me for being so open about my experiences about therapy, and it really encouraged them as therapists as well. I've never looked at it from that side before, why would I, so that was really great, so thank you, you guys for the great work you're doing.

**That's great to hear, thanks.**

Yes, it was great, I must say. Yes, I'm here today and the question was, how did this all start for me?

**Absolutely, yes.**

Yes, well basically I, looking back now, I'm in my '40s now, but looking back I can see I'd suffered depression on and off it since I was young. I would definitely say from my teens, and particularly in my '20s. If we go back in context, in those days we didn't talk about mental health and it was something very exclusive to a certain type of people so we're told, which is not the average person. It's usually for a certain type of person, mental illness, people who either, via drug-induced or maybe they'd been on the wrong side of the tracks, or maybe they'd been in prison, or maybe they come from abuse or bad family and things like that. I didn't fit into any of those categories so it never occurred to me that I could've been something like depressed, God forbid, and so it was very much overlooked.

It was overlooked by me, it was overlooked by my parents, overlooked by society, not something that you ever heard mentioned in school, nothing that my friends or family ever spoke about, and certainly for the black community, we're even more a few steps behind that, so there's still that whole shame and stigma attached. Going through that and then seeing the ups and downs, again reflecting, we just wouldn't have seen it, particularly in line with my career because I was high in the good sides and I was low in the bad sides, and that kind of seems normal, right? If you're going through a tough time, your mood is going to be a bit low, but it was just, I was just seen as moody, I wasn't seen as anything else. She's just, Leah is great, she's fun, she's just brilliant, but she's moody, you know. Be careful of Leah, she might switch, that type of thing.

It came to a head in a variety of ways which seems very quick in the end, but looking back, maybe it wasn't. Like I said, it probably went on for years and years. How long is a piece of string? How it all came to a head is that for me suddenly, ping! I went through a spell of very deep depression in my early '30s and was subsequently diagnosed with bipolar, and that was based upon my mood just went from really low, to super high, so I was displaying all your typical bipolar symptoms. The issue was though that again, that was eight years ago now, still I didn't know anything about bipolar, didn't even really... I'd heard of it, didn't know it, didn't know what it was, and in fact nobody believed me, not even my own GP or my family, and it's something that I had to really fright for to get the help, otherwise I don't think I'd be here today.

**Right, okay, and we'll come back to that, fighting to get the help, but firstly I just wanted to ask about, there is a lot of debate within our profession about whether a diagnosis is helpful, a mental health diagnosis. For instance, there's an argument that a lot of what is labelled mental illness is actually a natural reaction to trauma, abuse, adversity, for instance. What is your view? I think we should get in that argument that there are people for whom they don't fit that, and it's something else going on, so I wondered what you thought about the helpfulness of that label?**

It's such an interesting and laid question. It made me think actually, oh, okay, so the label itself, I'm not into labels. Equally though, I'm glad I have this label. If you'd asked me that ten years ago, I would've screamed and cried and said I couldn't think of anything worse, even two years ago, because I've kept it a secret. I've only been speaking about this in the last two years. I was mortified, I was embarrassed. I thought nobody would want to work with me again. I just, I couldn't believe I had bipolar. How degrading, how embarrassing for me. This is awful. And actually now that I am just embracing who I am as a person, who would I be if I were not bipolar, and that's how I look, and so for me, just, it's really difficult because one side of me says no, don't want the label. The other side says well actually, just knowing what it is, knowing what the beast is, has actually helped me. It's helped me fight. It's helped me overcome, and it's helping me help others.

We've all got to name something, we've all got to call something by a name, right, and I guess if it's bipolar in this case for me, then it just is what it is. I think though the point of it being a natural reaction to trauma and various things in people's lives that, i.e. can happen to everyone, that should be something that is explored. That's something that should be, yes, just explored further, and I think it's, it makes absolute sense actually, and I think what triggered my mania was trauma, was certain things that was going on in my life, certain things that maybe had happened, just being in the industry, you know, from young. I know that one of the things that certainly was a trigger for me was being told by TV execs that I'm a brilliant presenter but I'm black, and black doesn't sell. Something like that messed with my head because I can't change the colour of my skin. Imagine being in an industry unlike other industries where you are promoted based upon your skills and you can graft and you can grow.

The TV industry as a presenter isn't like that, so if you sit before your big execs at big networks and they say to you know, look, we absolutely love what you do, we love you, that's why you're here and we'll give you jobs, but it can only be to a certain level. We can't give you big stuff, and that's really because you're black, because the UK don't like black people out of London, which I personally don't think is true. Any show I do I'm always well received and well loved, thank God, people just see me for me, but that affected me, and I would say that was definitely a trigger to my mania that subsequently got me diagnosed with bipolar. Does that mean though that I would never have been bipolar? I don't think so, therefore I can't blame my condition on things that happened to me by the hands of other people. There are also upsides to bipolar, so it doesn't mean that it's all bad, but I think there definitely is a point in it that is worth exploring.

**Yes, absolutely. It sounds as though those first two years when you said you kept quiet about it, when you felt a lot of shame, it must have been devastating to actually be given such a serious diagnosis. But now you're out and proud and you're an ambassador for Bipolar UK as you mentioned, so what changed for you in those two years?**

Yes, it was actually seven years, I kept your secret for seven years, yes, I've only recently come out in the last couple years, so about the last year-and-a-half, in fact it will be two years this year since my first post on social media where I went, I'm bipolar, basically, and that's just the way it is. That was the post that changed my life, so just recapping on your question, sorry, you said how's it been...

**What made you feel, what gave you the confidence, what was the trigger for the decision to stop hiding and to come out?**

Yes, I was fed up. I was so fed up. I felt like no matter what I was doing, I was going round in circles, and more than anything else, I felt like I wasn't being real. I wasn't being real, true to the world. I wasn't being true to myself, and I'm a very honest person. Anyone who has a conversation with me, you know, that's the one thing I can say. They could say many things, but the one feedback I always get is that Leah is very real. She says it as it is. Sometimes she says it a bit too much as it is, but she says it as it is, and you always know where you stand, and actually good or bad, I like being that way. So you can imagine hiding something so massive, I felt like a fraud. What was really getting to me was that I'd had this breakdown. I never thought I'd work again. I got this diagnosis. I kept it all a secret and I started to slowly rebuild and it was tough, and every day was tears. Every day was blood. Every day was sweat.

It was hard, but my star, so to speak, started to rise again, and I started to work again. I started to broaden my network again and do things I never thought I'd do, because I thought bipolar was a life sentence, a death sentence, it was over. I just thought for me, it's over in every way possible. As I started to bill and people started to show me respect within the industry, I'd won an award in my prior phase, my prior life, as I put it in terms of my early part of my TV career, but for me, it's like in two sections. I've got everything that happened in 15 years before my breakdown, and everything that's happened in the last eight years since, and, well, decade almost since. As it started to rise again, I started winning more awards. Most inspirational woman, best woman in the UK, top presenter, top personality, blah, blah, blah, in these different sectors, and it just made me feel awful, because although they were giving me respect and accolades for my work which was wonderful, I felt like I'm not being myself.

I'm not being true to myself and it was really, it was like the last cog in my recovery that I had to release, and that was just being open and saying, yes, I have mental illness. I suffer sometimes. Sometimes things aren't all roses, and I know I make it look really easy. I know I look very well put together, and for some maybe very glamorous even and, you know, I speak well or I appear confident, and I am those things, but actually there is something that I battle, and I'm battling in silence and I am so over it now. I want to be me, I want to be free, I want to speak boldly. I realised that there are other people who were also hiding, and actually I can use my platform and I could speak about this to try and normalise this, as I've had to do among my own family and friends, and so, you know, since doing that, my life has changed, and I actually say it to you with a smile. It's still not easy. It's not easy. I still struggle some days but I see the impact that speaking of it has had on people, but more importantly in this case, on myself, because hiding it was eroding me. It was like a poison, and now I feel like it's gone and I feel just so much better just for that alone, it's amazing.

**Yes, wow, that is quite journey Leah, and I just wondered about how you felt your ethnicity as a black woman had played out in that journey, that mental health journey. Was it a factor in how long it took you to get the help, to get the diagnosis, or to feel able to ask for help, for instance?**

Well, the thing is, this is quite a controversial subject in terms of... I know there's a lot of conversation at the moment in terms of racial disparities within the healthcare system, towards black and ethnic minority people, particularly black people, and I don't want to put any kind of statement or throw anything into that. These are discussions that I've been having on different platforms with people, because it keeps coming up. There's evidence, there's statistics, so this is true, there is something there, but for me personally, I don't want to say that my experience and trying to find help for my bipolar or my mental illness or mental health in general, had anything to do with being black. Although looking back at the way I did have to bang down doors, some people would argue that no, there was some part of it to do with that.

With me personally, look, there's enough, I've got enough to worry about. I'm not even going to get into that. I feel like though I did have to fight in a different kind of way. It could've been because I was black, it could've been because I was a woman, it could've just been because I was articulate. Being articulate has really been not a good thing for me during this time, because doctors and psychologists and even my GP from the first instance was like, but you're articulate, you can talk about your feelings, you're saying how you feel, and therefore you're all right. What does that mean? So because I can say to you I feel suicidal today, help me, that means that actually I don't need help, because I could see what's going on? To me, that is crazy, pardon the pun, and that is why I ended up writing a suicide note to my GP saying if you don't help me today, I will kill myself, and it was the truth. I was at the end of my tether, nobody was helping me.

My family, obviously black, well, I come from a mixed family to be honest, but none of them, they were all like, oh no, we don't say things about this. I remember going to them and saying, I don't think, you know the doctor said I was suffering depression all these years, I don't think it's depression. I think it's bipolar because I remember seeing Stacy Slater in *Eastenders*. She had bipolar, and she's acting like... And they said, oh no, don't say things like that, and it was very hush, hush, like woah! So I thought, oh, I'm not going back there again. Went to my GP, my GP said no, no, no, no, no, so my only choice was to literally, because I was so manic and I was so impulsive and I was afraid that I was just going to wake up one morning, or any moment and just go, okay, take your own life today. I would've done it, but there was this voice inside of me, this part of me that is still very aware; even through what other people would call madness, was still very aware, I was still there, I was still in there somewhere, and I wanted help.

I didn't want to die. I didn't want to be a statistic, and I certainly didn't want to wake up one day and take my life out of impulse. So my final straw was writing that GP note, and that's how I'd got the help, but I begged for them to section me, take me, take me in the hospital please, and they wouldn't, which is not a bad thing obviously, they wouldn't, but it was... I have had to fight, even to get therapy, even up until now I've had to fight over the last eight years to be heard, over the last ten years should I say, to be heard because I can speak, and I think that is, that's unfair. People with bipolar, from what I'm seeing, everyone I've met so far with bipolar seems to be very articulate. They seem to be able to speak very well, and I just think that it's a bit damaging when you go, oh, you're not running outside with your knickers on your head, therefore you don't need our help. I think that is very dangerous because it's people like myself who were suffering in silence behind closed doors, those are the ones that say I can't take this pain any more, and I've got to get rid, and that is what breaks my heart, and that's why I talk about it now, because I just want it, I just want that to stop.

**Yes, I think it's true about a lot of, there are a lot of misconceptions aren't there about mental illness, that you're not functioning if you're mentally ill, but you're a great example of using all of your energy no doubt, because you're exhausted.**

Yes.

**You manage to cling on in your way, and you're functioning an outwardly very successful life, so it sounds like a journey to get the help you need, but you did eventually get some therapy, so, and you said it was important in helping you to come to terms with your diagnosis. What was it that your therapist offered that was valuable?**

Well, first of all I'm on therapy, I've just started psychodynamic therapy in the last few weeks, that, I have waited almost a decade for. That's been tough. That was the one that came through all the different services that I had to go through in order to get there, but when I was first diagnosed, it was just like, here's some meds and get on with your life, and that was it. I was left to my own devices, and I was like, no, I need to talk. This isn't just about giving me tablets and sweeping it under the carpet. I need to talk to somebody, and it just wasn't there, and so finally after ten years of being lost in the system, and that is why some people say, oh, it's a colour thing, it's a this, it's a that. I just think it's a system thing. I think the system is broken, it's messed up and it needs help, and that is a whole separate podcast, I'm sure. I cannot bear the system. I think it's an awful system, and I think people are suffering. Literally there are days where I sit in my house and I can be in tears, because I will just see other people suffering and not being able to get help and it's horrible, so there is no system.

Particularly now during this pandemic at a time where mental illness, mental ill health is more rife than anything else, where is the system? There isn't one. There's nowhere that people can go. They have to wait, and they're suffering, and God knows what else is going on. But anyway, I just, I don't know, I feel like when I first got that first therapy, maybe it was about four years ago now I'd say, so I still had a big wait from when I first got my diagnosis. That was through my GP. I said, look, I can't wait. I keep being lost in the system as well, they kept losing me in the system. I had to keep going back to square one, and as we know, it's at least two-year waiting list for therapy on the NHS, so if you keep losing me and keep losing me, we're going like, hello! I'm coming on to eight years later at this point, still no therapy, sorry, you keep being lost. Anyway, I managed to get I think eight sessions via my talking therapy at the GP and it was just a great start, because, yes, I'd had CBT in the past. I guess that's a form of therapy, but that was many years ago. Didn't help at all. This was before I was diagnosed by the way.

So my GP's talking therapy now was just, we kind of just... We didn't go deep but she did open the doors to certain things that I was able to take away and think about that I think was the beginning of a lot of change for me. Things like my relationship with my parents, I guess, i.e. of helping them to understand about mental illness and stuff. Things about my career, things about, even my relationship with money and certain traumas that happened as a child. We couldn't go deep into stuff but we were able to do exercises. We were able to do things that just unlocked certain parts of my brain that enabled me to see, which was my biggest crux of why, why me, why bipolar? That was the real key thing that she got me, I guess, in an indirect way to just kind of accept. I guess if I look back now, and even in this moment, say, I would imagine that that, those sessions helped prepare me to coming out, to just accepting. Yes, I've got bipolar, so what, let's just get on with it, come on, because ultimately I'm the one here who has to live with this on my own. I have to, and I'm fed up of... I just don't want to suffer.

I'd realised that there is life after diagnosis. I realised that I can live a good life after diagnosis. That being bipolar isn't the end of the world. It doesn't mean I can't have friends, I can't have relationships, I can't work, I can't be happy. They're all lies, and actually I know that now, and I just want to share it with everybody else who's in the same position as me, or has been and just feels like life is over. Go no, no, no, no, no, actually it's not you know, there's this whole other side that you could tap into, that feels so much better, so yes, I guess therapy helped me with that. I know it's a dirty word but I'm all for it, to be honest.

**Do you know, it's great to hear Leah that you, even just a short spate of therapy had such a triggering effect for you, was a catalyst really, for you to do your own work, and then to make the changes you needed to change. Because I think there is a feeling, especially when it comes to something as serious should I say as bipolar, but it would need to be long-term, and it would need to be deep, but it seems as though for you, actually just those few sessions of a safe place to talk and be heard, to help to explore made a difference, so that's really great to hear. Good to hear that you're back in therapy now working psychodynamically. Just moving on to Bipolar UK, so you're now an ambassador. Can you tell us a bit about that and how you go about raising awareness for them? I know that you're posting a lot on social media, so tell us, can you tell us why that is important?**

Can I just say very quickly, just touching on something you just said about this therapy, because I want people to understand that, you know, to be realistic. Yes, those eight sessions helped me, and you're right, I don't think it always needs to be this big long-term thing, but I think it needs to all be part of a plan. I had those eight sessions, but I still spent years since then. I've had suicidal thoughts and really ill health, so it's not a cure, but I think it just started a little seed in me that was able to start growing, so I think that's important to just be very real and very honest with, you know. I didn't go in there and this person didn't give me this magical thing and I walked out going, yes, I'm loud and proud and I'm going to tell the world. It's still, I mean, from therapy to when I first spoke out was still a good two years, so it wasn't like it was a quick fix. Like I said, there were things that I learnt but it's a longer process, but I think it's important. Anyway, I just wanted to say that.

In terms of what I'm doing with Bipolar UK, how I'm finding it, I think it's great. It's so nice to just feel like I'm a part of something, that I could fly the flag for something in a positive way. It gives me purpose as well, and I think that's the one thing with any, particularly the more severe mental illnesses, the ones that you can't just shake off, you know, because we know with depression, you can have medication, you can have therapy and all sorts, and it can go. It can go, you know I mean, like anxiety, you can get rid of these things. Then there are things like bipolar and schizophrenia are some of the more other complicated mental illnesses that you can't get rid of. You're in it for the long haul. It is what it is. I actually feel very proud that I can work with a charity, something that I wanted to do from the early doors. Even through the tears and the suicidal thoughts, I used to sometimes think of the good side and say to myself, one day when you get out of this, when you will, you're going to help others and you're going to do, you're going to work with a charity, and you're going to speak out.

These were all things that I really was speaking about and sort of manifesting in a way. It's something I've always wanted to do, so when Bipolar UK reached out to me, and I was literally about to reach out to them, like, that same week. It was, obviously it was meant to be and the work that I've been doing, just interviews, awareness, writing blogs, to me, I haven't even done much yet. I haven't even touched the tip of the iceberg yet. I've been working with them now I think since the summer last year, 2020. It's little steps. I host their conferences and things like that, so it's just given me a level of purpose as well. I feel, I know it's really weird to say, but proud, if there's a way to fly the flag for bipolar in a positive way, because obviously we just see negative stuff really, don't we, most of the time, so to be able to say to people there's life after diagnosis. You can live successfully with a mental illness, just like I do. It's not the end of the world, although it feels like it sometimes, that actually, do you know what, you can function and you can be there and you can be in the moment, and we can do this.

There are other sides to this condition that people don't know because it's still so taboo and so swept under the carpet, so I think just for me, living and breathing is actually a really good flag to be waving. People could go on my social media and they just see, oh, she's working. She's doing her thing, like, she's funny, she likes to laugh, she likes to have fun. I think those things are just as important for people to see, as hearing an interview of me talking with the lovely Sally, saying, you know, bipolar this and bipolar that. I just think people seeing people with their own eyes on public platforms and in the public eye, who live with this condition, but it's not written on their head, I'm bipolar, treat me differently. I'm like no. She's got bipolar, yes, so what, so what.

**Absolutely. You talked about the other side, the other side of this condition, and I wondered about that. How much of your drive and your creativity is linked to being bipolar? You've had a lot of success in the creative industries as well as winning your awards on TV, you've also set up your own coaching company called The Red Carpet Academy which I believe teaches people some of those on-camera skills and presenting.**

Yes.

**How much would you say, would you attribute your drive and creativity to being bipolar?**

I know that creativity is in my genes in terms of other family members, all super creative. Some are in the industry, some have been in the industry in various ways, whether it's the entertainment industry as a whole or just creative in their jobs and in their beings. But also I am convinced that most of, definitely the drive and that will and that grit and that person who picks themselves up, falls, picks themselves up, falls again, picks themselves up. I personally think that's bipolar. I think that is bipolar probably in its truest form, that up and down. Sometimes we fall and we go, can't pick ourselves up, but then we just manage to pick ourselves up. I definitely feel like a lot of that creativity, a lot of that resilience, definitely a lot of what I can achieve just in a day, or in a week, compared to the average person, to the average person it's a lot and to me it's nothing, I'm like, oh my God, I've still got a million things to do, and I know I can still do them. I kind of say to myself sometimes that maybe I'm a bit lazy or procrastinating a bit, which I have been doing in the last couple of months, but that's because I think lockdown. I'm just over it in this moment that I'm speaking to you. I think everyone's been feeling this way to be honest.

**Yes, I hear you.**

Yes. I definitely feel like there is a big something to do bipolar and creativity and drive, I really do. Again, I think that's something that I really would love to explore and experiment, and I'd love to do that in a documentary form or something. I think it would be so interesting.

**Yes, watch this space.**

Yes.

**Leah, we've only got a few minutes left, so let me finish by asking you about... Many counsellors might feel underqualified to work with clients with a bipolar diagnosis and it was great to hear that you have actually heard from some therapists who've read your piece in Therapy Today. I'd just like, so what would you say? What would you to like to say to therapists who are listening today about, what's... What is it important that they understand, that they can truly help people with a bipolar diagnosis?**

Do you know Sally, I have done a million interviews in my lifetime, and I don't tend to feel emotional in interviews or anything like that. There's this part of me that just, a different part of my brain that I use, I don't know, but I think this is the first time that I actually feel a bit emotional and I felt emotional when I read that question, because you did send me the questions in advance and I did skim them. I never, I didn't make up any answers. I thought Leah, whatever comes out of your mouth comes out, that's just how I speak, but thank you for sending me those questions, but it made me feel emotional reading it and it made me feel emotional just now hearing it. That just makes me feel sad that people feel that way about bipolar. Can I just say, I feel it on the other side because I'm that person that's waited all these years for the therapy, and now it kind of makes sense, that maybe there's just not enough therapists who can specialise or who want to treat people with bipolar and actually, don't leave us behind, like, don't leave us behind.

As you said it, I just felt this surge of emotion because I felt like these therapists don't understand the impact in the same way that little old me, I don't have any, oh, I don't have any kind of qualifications or anything to talk about this. I've only got life experience to talk about bipolar, right, and you therapists, you're working hard and you're studying for this and whatever, please don't leave out the people with bipolar because I think it's a lot more common than what people actually think. Also, there's a lot of people like myself that need you. We need you. Don't leave us behind because it appears that it's not a quick fix. I feel like that as well, even when I go and pitch things in the TV world about mental illness and mental health. It's difficult because execs and producers, they want to see quick fixes, like a makeover, they want to see in an hour somebody go from, I'm depressed, to, oh my God, I'm cured, you know?

That's just not how life is, but please do not leave us behind, because I think there are more bipolar people than we know, because it is so layered, but as I've mentioned before, even in the last piece that I did for Therapy Today was just talking, initial talking, even those eight sessions literally changed my life. It wasn't immediate, no, I get that. It wasn't immediate, but it has changed my life, I'm telling you. I have not taken my own life so that's a success, so yes, let's face it. I am now able to just think more and see more and not be so ashamed of my diagnosis. If I got anything out of this was saying that I am not ashamed of this any more. Do you know how empowering that is? That is why I'm alive. That's why I'm speaking to you now, so I just, I say to the therapists listening to this, specialise in bipolar please.

Be a therapist that specialises in this, and I tell you what, bipolar people, as difficult as we probably are, I hold my hands up, we're also very beautiful and very colourful, and I know there are loads of different sides. I can't speak for everyone, but what I would say is that I know that speaking alone, just talking to people, and even connecting with people bipolar in a creative way, music therapy, there are so many different types of things that could be encouraged, you know? Just don't give up on us, please. We need you, we need you, so any therapist listening to this, please, I beg of you, help people who are bipolar, specialise in it and just do it. I think you're doing a great job, and I understand that therapy can be a dirty word. I understand that. It's difficult for both the therapist and obviously the person at times. It's hard to find those connections, but more than ever, your job is so important, and I just want you to know that from somebody who is living with a bipolar diagnosis, so thank you.

**Thank you Leah, a very powerful message there, and thank you very much for your time, for sharing, for your honesty, and I wish you all the best with your fantastic career.**

Thank you so much, what a pleasure. It's funny, I said to you before we started recording, oh no, no, I don't get emotional or upset about anything, and I literally felt myself just then in that moment, because, you know, yes, I just... Hey, maybe I'm being whimsical and I hope everything just works out, and I know the world isn't like that, but we do need these special people in this world. Thank you for having me Sally, it's been a pleasure.

**Thank you.**

Thank you for listening to the BACP Therapy Today podcast. We hope that you enjoyed it, and remember, if you've got any ideas or suggestions on what we might include in future editions, please do not hesitate to get in touch. Thanks again.

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