

Alana, 34

Author, podcaster & financial services Senior Product Development Manager living with schizophrenia, SYDNEY

Alana, 34, Sydney is a Senior Product Development Manager who has dedicated more than 13 years to the financial services and coaching industries, working for some of Australia's largest banks. She is also a podcaster and a passionate author who, in June 2020, published a book – *'Being Brave: From trauma to joy'* – which captures her experience of living with schizophrenia, being on the brink of homelessness, and her subsequent, mental health transformation.

In December 2013, when working in a high-pressure role, Alana began to develop disordered thinking and paranoid thoughts. She started to distrust her colleagues, and to believe they were bullying her. Despite visiting a doctor, counsellor and psychologist at the time, no one could pinpoint precisely what was wrong.

Soon after, Alana experienced her first psychotic episode, which left her convinced her Dad was conspiring against her, and that she was possessed. During this episode, she was admitted to a mental health ward at her local hospital, where she spent the next three weeks.

Over the ensuing six years, Alana experienced five psychotic episodes and five hospital admissions, before her condition stabilised. It wasn't until her fifth and final hospital admission, that she was diagnosed with schizophrenia.

Today, by sharing her story, Alana hopes to destigmatise schizophrenia, and to raise awareness of this often misunderstood, and disabling illness.

This is Alana's story.

In November 2014, Alana's dad suggested she spend the weekend at his place on the NSW Central Coast, to relax and recharge from the stress of work. While driving up to the Central Coast, Alana suddenly ordered her dad to stop the car. She then leapt out, and ran for her life, believing her dad was conspiring against her, and up to something sinister.

"I ran into a hotel lobby and asked the girl behind reception to call the police. Once the police arrived, they handed me over to the ambulance officers, who had to use considerable force to get me into the back of their ambulance.

"The next thing I recall was being admitted to hospital emergency, where I spent the night in a constant state of paranoia," said Alana.

Before her diagnosis, Alana had never considered herself to be at risk of developing schizophrenia, despite her family history of mental illness.



“My family has a history of mental health issues. This fact was often raised in my medical reviews, along with the suggestion that I too, was genetically predisposed to developing a mental illness,” Alana said.

It wasn't until Alana's fifth and final psychotic episode that she was diagnosed with schizophrenia. Up until then, she had been informed she was living with psychotic depression – a unique subtype of depressive illness in which mood disturbance is accompanied by delusions, hallucinations, or both.

“Being admitted to hospital was always very traumatic. On one occasion, I was wheeled out of my workplace by paramedics while strapped to a stretcher. Another time, I was relocated barefoot, at two o'clock in the morning, by two strong guards, from the emergency department to a mental health ward,” said Alana.

Since being diagnosed with psychotic depression, and later schizophrenia, Alana has received an outpouring of support from her partner, her work colleagues, family, and friends. Just prior to experiencing her first psychotic episode however, she was dismissed by her manager, on the spot.

“My manager at the time told me that people no longer knew how to be around me.

“Since then however, my employer has been incredibly supportive, and even provided me with extended sick leave during one of my mental health ward admissions,” Alana said.

By sharing her story of living with schizophrenia, Alana hopes to completely transform the stigma surrounding schizophrenia.

“No one should be defined by an illness, label or limitation.

“Since being diagnosed with schizophrenia, I have experienced a total life transformation, whereby I have learned to completely accept myself,” said Alana.

“Instead of viewing my mental illness as a limitation, I view it as something which has gifted me incredible opportunities that I would not have otherwise, received.”

Today, Alana's schizophrenia is well managed, and she has not experienced any schizophrenia-related symptoms or psychotic episodes since 2018.

According to Alana, timely and affordable access to a range of treatment options plays a crucial role in the effective management of schizophrenia.

“The Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS) is important as it makes medication more accessible and affordable to all.

“For people living with schizophrenia, like myself, access to medication is crucial, as it helps us to avoid crises, and to look after our mental health,” Alana said.

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