

Ray Stanley and the Rollercoaster
(A Story for Children and Adolescents about Bipolar Disorder)
By
Neil Fullan MD
©Copyright February, 2011

Prologue

I have written these stories to help children, adolescents and parents understand various mental health issues (in this case ADHD). This particular story is dedicated to Mr. Vaughn Montgomery and his family who showed great kindness to my family and I when I was pediatrics resident in Michigan.

Winter, 20009

Ray was vaguely aware that something was rubbing his cheek, but he wanted it to go away since he was having a great dream about scoring the winning goal for the Huskies. He eventually opened his eyes to discover Boomer, his yellow lab, was licking his face trying to revive him. He said, "Down Boomer," as he dragged the sleeve of his pajamas across his face. He pulled back his arm to give Boomer a whack and stopped himself before he did it. The dog was only being friendly and wanting to play; and he was doing Ray a favor to get him up in time for basketball practice. This was different from middle school; you weren't allowed to miss practices on the varsity squad. Ray crammed a couple of Pop Tarts in his face, grabbed his gear, and ran through six inches of new slushy snow to the bus stop.

Sleeping on the bus was not easy, but Ray made a stab at it. He must have dozed off because the next thing he knew they were at the school gym. Practice went well until Ray got into it with Bill Comber under the boards, and almost without realizing it, he elbowed Bill so hard in the ribs that Bill fell to the floor clutching his side. He thought Bill was faking it and he said so which he later regretted when x-rays showed Bill had two broken ribs. Bill would be on the bench for at least four weeks and the coach told Ray he would be too. When the coach gave him the news he got very angry and told the coach if he went through with it, he would quit the team. Coach Wagner told him that was his decision, but he should think it over since he been acting like a different kid than the coach knew to be this season. Ray told him that he didn't need to think it over, he was quitting. A few weeks later, he awoke to the reality of what he had done, and became exceptionally sad. He actually broke into tears when he begged the coach to let him back on the team. He was surprised when the coach told him he could come back but

any more rough stuff and he would be off for good. Ray promised to be on his best behavior.

At first he was very happy to be practicing, but then he felt his enthusiasm dwindle, and the sadness returned. He found himself wanting to sleep more and his energy level continued to drop. His parents noticed this too, and they took him to Dr. Evans to have him checked out, but the tests all came back normal. A week or so later his energy was back, and he was feeling on top of the world. He felt so good, in fact, that informed his teammates that he felt he was really holding the team together, and the coach should be giving him more playing time because of this. These types of statements did not go over well with the other players or the coach, and he began to find himself riding the bench more, and being asked to socialize with teammates less. He tried to correct for this by shooting more and making more plays, but this backfired because the coach told him he needed to be more of a team player. He worried about this, and began to stay up later and later at night thinking about it. He would devise elaborate plans to fix things. The late nights made more tired and crabby. One day his mother told him, “we’re all tired of walking on eggs around you, Ray, what is wrong?”

“I don’t know, Mom,” he replied, “one minute I’m up and the next one I’m down. I don’t’ ever seem to be able to stay in the middle. Actually, it’s more like for two weeks at a time, I feel like I could do anything. I could be President or an NBA star; I stay up at night planning the great things I am going to do in my life. The week after that I feel like never leaving my bedroom; I just lay here and cry about how I’ve messed up my life. There seems like there’s no way out. The next week, I’ back to feeling up and angry. It’s like being on a rollercoaster that never stops. I’ve even got Cindy mad at me, and we’ve been

going out for six months. I told her I expected her to be at all my games, even the away ones. She told me she would if she didn't have to study for a test, and I blew up at her saying that I was more important than any test. When she tried to explain how important tests were to her because she wanted to go to a school that taught oceanography, I stormed off and left her in the gym to find her own ride home. I found out later Ms. Baxter drove her home in tears, and now I feel like a total jerk."

His mother said, "To tell the truth, Ray, you seem to be having the same kind of trouble my brother had at your age. I think it would be a good idea for you to talk to him about this." Ray agreed and called his Uncle Mike that evening and he said would meet him at Serok's restaurant that Saturday and talk to him about what was going on. Ray felt relieved by this, and looked forward to seeing his uncle. He found himself not thinking about this much later because he was preoccupied with thought of the big game with Jefferson High the following night since there was a big rivalry between the two schools.

Finally the big night arrived. It was bitterly cold and sleet was hitting Ray's windshield in horizontal sheets. Ray was worried the game would be called because of bad weather, but relieved to find out it wasn't. He looked around the home team's bleachers to see if Cindy was there, but she wasn't; that hurt. Ray could tell both teams were really pumped about the game. The teams were pretty evenly matched, but since it was a home game for the Huskies, Ray felt they had a significant advantage . . . Husky's fan were enthusiastic to say the least. He was relieved when the coach allowed him to start, which made him very happy, and he, in turn, was careful to be a "team player." The game seemed to be going well into the second half then someone shoved him and he collided with a Jefferson player. The kid went sprawling and the ref' called a foul on Ray.

Ray tried to explain to the ref' that he had been shoved into the Jefferson player. After several minutes of arguing, the ref' told him, "that's enough; one more word and you're out." Ray was so worked up defending himself he didn't understand what the ref was telling him, so he kept shouting. The ref' told him he was out of the game, but Ray began shouting louder and in a way that was later described as "antagonistic and disrespectful." He refused to leave the gym even when the coach ordered him to leave, and he had to be escorted out by security. He would never forget the embarrassed look on his father's face as he stared at Ray in a way that said, "Is this really my son." The bottom line was the ejection of Ray from the game and, the next day, the team. When Ray got home his dad told him that he was grounded for the rest of the week including the weekend. Ray was already angry about the game so he told his dad he would do anything he wanted to do and walked out of the house. When he had not returned by two A.M his father called him as a runaway to the police. They found him walking around the park, and escorted him home with a lecture and a warning not to do it again. Ray told them he was sorry he worried his parents, which he was, and that he would not do it again, so they did not charge him with breaking the curfew for teenagers. Ray was expecting his father to get very angry, but he only looked at him with a very sad look on his face, and told Ray he didn't what to do to help him anymore. He hugged Ray, and they all headed for bed.

Ray had plenty of time to speak with his uncle on Saturday, since he was no longer going to basketball practice. His uncle opened the conversation with a story about his life when he was Ray's age. He told Ray that he began having mood swings in grade school, and by the time he reached high school he had a reputation for being a hothead and other kids like to tease him to see if he would lose it. Many times he would; he would

then get all the blame because of his reputation; and then his tormentors would laugh at him for taking the bait they threw out to him. He would come home from school angry, and get into arguments with his brothers and parents. One day he got so angry, he punched his brother, and the police were called. He was taken to a psychiatric hospital where he was diagnosed with bipolar disease. The doctor put him on a medicine that reduced his anger and mood swings. He got into family counseling where his whole family learned about his mood disorder and how they could help him. His family talked to the school with him about his problem, and they were very understanding about it. His concentration improved, and as a result he boosted his grades. Ultimately he got a scholarship to college, and went on to graduate school. Ray thanked his uncle for sharing his story, and told him that he had decided to see a psychiatrist and get a professional opinion about what was going on with him.

When Ray got home he gave his parents the upshot about what he had talked about with his uncle, and told them he would like to be evaluated by a psychiatrist because much of what his uncle shared with him was similar to his own problems. The family made an appointment with the child and adolescent psychiatrist that his uncle had recommended. When they got there they gave him the history of Ray's mood swings and other difficulties, and this did not seem to surprise him. It was Ray that was surprised out how many teens have bipolar disease. The treatment was twofold: therapy and medication. The therapy consisted of individual and family therapy. The doctor explained the medicine to him, and slowly built the dose up to a point where Ray reported that his mood swings were under control. That way the minimum amount of medicine was used to control them. Ray's family took his uncle's advice and talked to the school about the problem; as with his uncle the

school understood. The Principal even talked to Ray's basketball coach, and Ray was reinstated to the team. It didn't take the players long to see that Ray's anger was under control, and they were much friendlier to Ray. Things relaxed a great deal at home and school and Ray ended up with his own college scholarship. The best part was it was a basketball scholarship. In Ray's words, "Life was good."

