

Madness to wellness; Vitamin supplement a controversial 'cure,' but author's personal struggle promise of hope to bipolar sufferers

Lois Legge Features Writer

FOR YEARS, Autumn Stringam's mind struggled through a maze of misery.

At 10, she thought about killing herself.

As a teenager, the suicidal thoughts grew even louder.

So did the other voices in her head and the characteristic highs and lows of bipolar disorder - a disease shared by her maternal grandfather and her mother.

Both of them eventually committed suicide.

By the time she reached her late teens, Stringam grappled with her own extreme periods of mania and depression, while battling "demonic" hallucinations and paranoia.

She eventually became psychotic, slapping herself and tearing at her own skin, convinced the man she married at age 18 was trying to kill her.

These days, the author from Coaldale, Alta., figures she's as much at peace as anyone.

"I think I feel normal, if I could figure out what normal felt like," she says during a recent telephone interview, in advance of a book promotion stop in Halifax. "I mean, I still experience PMS-type symptoms at about the right time. . . . I think I'm just a normal woman."

But the road to normal has been long and tortured for the 34-year-old, a struggle outlined in *A Promise of Hope* (The Astonishing True Story of a Woman Afflicted with Bipolar Disorder and the Miraculous Treatment That Cured Her).

The so-called "miraculous" treatment, however, isn't without controversy. And although "cure" is part of the book's title, the mother-of-four hesitates to call it that.

But the author claims the vitamin-rich supplement Empowerplus - co-developed by her father Anthony Stephan out of "desperation" to help her, and once banned by Health Canada - has made all the difference.

She says the concoction of 36 vitamins and minerals (everything from vitamins A, C, B, D and E, to grape seed extract) has lowered her highs and lifted her lows in a way no psychiatric drugs were able to do.

Health Canada, however, has serious concerns about use of the product - actually adapted from a vitamin mix used in the animal feed industry to keep pigs from attacking each other or themselves in the pen.

The federal agency took her father's company, Truehope Nutritional Support Ltd., to court in 2003, alleging it was selling Empowerplus without the necessary drug identification number. The federal

department later lost the case, but still warns consumers about potential side effects.

In fact, a Health Canada advisory last February says the agency has received nine case reports of serious adverse reactions to the supplement.

"Most of the adverse reactions relate to worsening of psychiatric symptoms in those patients with serious underlying mental health problems, such as bipolar disorder and depression," it warns.

"The worsening of these symptoms could be related to taking the product and discontinuing prescription medications, or taking the product in conjunction with prescribed medications. As a result, Health Canada is advising consumers with these serious conditions that there is a potential risk to health associated with the use of the product Empowerplus."

The agency is also concerned about how the product is being promoted, "including unauthorized health claims," the advisory states. And it says unqualified staff at Truehope Nutritional Support Ltd. has been giving patients medical advice, including advice to discontinue prescribed medications.

"This may result in serious adverse health consequences," the advisory says. "It is important to discuss the

treatment of serious medical conditions with a medically qualified practitioner."

But Stringam says staff with the company's non-profit support program is vigilant about advising patients to consult a doctor before going off their medications.

"That is a concern but I feel like it's been adequately addressed, because in order for them to get the supplement at all, they have to go through the support program where they get really good information and . . . the (people) who do the support program work with people's physicians. I feel like we have it covered in the book, because I was concerned about telling a story that seemed too hopeful and having people do things that were dangerous."

Despite repeated requests, Health Canada didn't provide anyone to directly answer questions about what it considers dangerous about the supplement (made in the United States), or its current status.

But spokesman Alastair Sinclair said via e-mail that in order to receive a licence for a natural health product, companies must apply to Health Canada and prove "the safety, efficacy and quality of the product under the recommended conditions of use."

He goes on to say that the agency can't confirm if a company has submitted a product licence application, since it keeps such matters confidential.

"To date, the product has not been issued a product licence by Health Canada," he says in the e-mail.

So then, how can it legally be sold?

In a follow-up e-mail, Sinclair says individuals are allowed to import a 90-day supply of non-prescription drugs and natural health products for their personal use, or "another individual in that person's care or guardianship."

What that means for Truehope isn't entirely clear, although Stringam says selling the product is perfectly legal, since the company won the court case and that Truehope and Health Canada are currently working out the proper labelling for the product.

Stringam also stresses that she's not against psychiatric drugs for people with bipolar disorder or other mental illnesses.

"I think that they saved my life until I found another answer," she says. "If I had been left raw without any intervention, I'm certain I would have been dead."

She credits her father's tenacity with keeping her alive and says both chance and faith also played a role. Given the death of his wife and the diagnoses of Stringam and her younger brother with bipolar disorder, her father was desperate for help, she says.

That's when he met animal feed specialist David Hardy who told him about a feed supplement that helped calm anxious or violent pigs with so-

called "ear and tail biting syndrome." The pair started working on a human version of the supplement.

Stringam says her disorder has been stabilized since 1996, when she stopped taking drugs and started using only the supplement.

"I know it says right on the front cover of the book 'the thing that cured her' and that's kind of funny, because I think I'm about as cured of bipolar as we all are of scurvy," she says. "If we stop taking vitamin C completely, all of us will eventually get scurvy. . . . It's a deficiency disease and I really believe in my heart . . . that my bipolar disease was a deficiency disease."

"I don't know if every bipolar person would have the same response," she adds. "In fact, I'm quite certain that every bipolar (person) wouldn't. But . . . if there was a core message, it's that there is hope and we're not done looking for answers and that (people with the disease) don't have to die."

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Figure:

Autumn Stringam, author of *A Promise of Hope (The Astonishing True Story of a Woman Afflicted with Bipolar Disorder and the Miraculous Treatment That Cured Her)* was in Halifax recently to promote her book. 'I think I feel normal, if I could figure out what normal felt like,' she says. The author claims the vitamin-rich supplement



Empowerplus- co-developed by her father Anthony Stephan to help her, and once banned by Health Canada- has made all the difference. (Ted Pritchard / Staff)

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This certificat is issued to Mr Dana Stringam for personal and temporary display.

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