

# For Pulsipher, down doesn't mean out

By **Bill Pulsipher**  
as told to **Baseball America's Alan Schwarz**

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It was April 1997 – Opening Night in Syracuse, when I was on rehab with the Mets at Triple-A Norfolk. My elbow had blown out 12 months before and I was all hyper, itching to make my first start. But something was wrong. Weird wrong. Terrifying wrong.



Stephen Dunn/Getty Images

Pulsipher started 1998 with the Mets but finished the season with the Brewers.

I woke up in the Ramada Inn like a colt burning to burst from the gates. Jitters, but normal jitters. When I got to the park, though, I felt all strange. This feeling of dread had been injected into my bloodstream and was pulsing through me faster and faster. And then I walked past the poster – the one of me and Paul Wilson and Jason Isringhausen – in the visitors clubhouse. Generation K. We were going to turn around the Mets. Then we all got hurt. I was the first one to come back. But on this first night in Syracuse, as I looked at that poster, the cocky Bill Pulsipher in the picture might as well have been someone else.

The butterflies fluttered out of my stomach and into my arms, my legs, my neck, everything. My hands began to drip. It was freezing that night – yet sweat was pouring out of me. I tried to pretend everything was normal, but during the long walk out to the bullpen for warm-ups, I knew it wasn't. That fear was confirmed when my first toss went right over the catcher's head.

"Hey man, relax," my bullpen catcher told me. "Just try to relax."

Relax? That only got me more antsy, more confused. I didn't know what was happening to me. I tried to chalk it up to Opening Day nerves, and made my way out to the mound for a fresh start there. I walked the first batter. Then the next guy bunted. I fielded it. And threw it into center

field. Guys running all over the place ...

People in the stands thought it was so cool that Bill Pulsipher – Kid K phenom, on his way back to the bigs, back to Broadway and stardom – was out there that night. But he was nowhere. And he wasn't coming back. The Bill Pulsipher everyone knew, I knew, was gone forever.

It's taken me all of the eight years since to figure that out. I've spent all that time learning the hard way that I am one of the thousands, probably millions, of Americans who live with clinical depression and/or anxiety. I've learned that using a prescription such as Prozac or Paxil is not a sign of weakness, but of self-understanding and strength.

Along the way, I've bounced from organization to organization wondering how I could pitch with a stomach of Mexican jumping beans. I've passed out on the bathroom floor and been rushed to the hospital after taking ephedra. Three years later, I stood mere feet from Steve Bechler when he collapsed and died from the same thing. I've given up on baseball, moved back to Florida and mowed fields for a living.

After eight long years, I've scratched my way back to the major leagues, as a lefty reliever for the Cardinals. It's a neat story that Bill Pulsipher, former Baseball America cover boy, has returned to the big leagues for the first time since 2001. But I don't want people to think of me as the former phenom, the kid who 10 years ago was going to join Wilson and Istringhausen to lead the Mets to a new glory era. Or the hotshot young lefty whose fastball and slider were going to make him a New York star.

I'd rather they think of me as the terrified kid who stood on the mound that night at Syracuse feeling totally alone – and wants others who feel the same way to know that they are anything but.

### **Ballplayers not immune to depression**

I guess I understand why other major-leaguers who use medication to treat their depression don't talk about it publicly. I know at least two – and believe me, plenty more are out there. Even though much of America has awakened to the medical realities of depression, baseball's little subworld still frowns upon it. If you can't even control your own mind, how will you control the opposition?

It's stupid, pseudo-macho garbage. Ballplayers are people, flesh and blood. We're not robots. Some might have money in their pockets, but that doesn't change the chemicals in their brains, the serotonin and norepinephrine that affect their thoughts and moods. Ballplayers aren't supposed to feel anxiety? Have you ever pitched to Barry Bonds?

The difference between the anxiety and depression that everyone faces and the Anxiety and Depression that are medical issues is that the capital-letter ones seem to come out of nowhere. Breaking up with a girlfriend, facing an impossible deadline, these are the (very legitimate) things that cause real sadness or angst for anybody. But they make sense and typically fade away. Clinical anxiety and depression sneak up on you for seemingly no reason, then won't leave you alone. Out of nowhere, it's like this little earthquake inside of you. Tiny tremors no one else

can see shake your core and leave you grasping for stability. But it isn't there. You try to get past it, tell yourself to suck it up, but the world keeps coming at you. Things other people can do with no thought at all - even putting one foot in front of the other - become tied up in a big knot you don't know how in the world you'll ever untangle.

The chemicals in your brain are supposed to ease your processing of this stuff, but yours are no help at all. You have to finish that presentation. You have to pick up your mother-in-law. Or in my case, you have to face major-league hitters with 50,000 people in the stands.

I never felt like that as a kid. I grew up in Fairfax, Va., near Washington. I was a hyper guy but nothing too unusual. My family life sucked at times – my parents divorced and I wound up living with my father and stepmother – but almost everything came easily to me. Especially sports. I was a stud left-handed pitcher and hitter at Fairfax High, and a really good basketball player. I do remember hating to shoot free throws.

I never experienced failure. I signed with the Mets as a second-round draft pick in 1992 and moved real fast through the system. Baseball America ranked me as the team's top prospect two years in a row - ahead of Preston Wilson, Edgardo Alfonzo, a bunch of future stars. By 1995, New York was all hyped up on how Paul Wilson, Jason Isringhausen and I were going to turn the Mets around just like Tom Seaver, Jerry Koosman and Jon Matlack. They made a poster of us before we even reached the majors.

I loved every minute of it. I really believed I was going to be a Hall of Fame pitcher – 300 wins, World Series rings, the whole thing. I had the arm for it: low-90s fastball with wicked movement, nasty slider and confidence. Yep, I always had that. I remember when the Mets brought in a psychologist to talk to minor-leaguers about dealing with pressure, and I blew it off. What's pressure when you have a golden arm? Make way for Bill Pulsipher, world.

I got called up to the majors in 1995, when I was 21. I did pretty well – a 5-7 record but a 3.98 ERA. And I was a yapper in the clubhouse, bouncing around, talking to reporters, acting like a big shot. The veterans hated me. If I saw a kid like that today in the Cardinals locker room, I'd tell him to shut the hell up. I still remember playing long-toss with Izzy on our off days, throwing like 300 feet across the outfield at Shea. We were such idiots!

I was gonna win 20 games every year, so I didn't care. But in the spring of 1996, I blew out my elbow and missed the whole season after Tommy John surgery. I tried to keep my head up, though. Pitchers came back from that operation, sometimes better than ever. I'd definitely be one of those. When I was sent to Triple-A for rehab after spring training, I was ticked off. I [complained] to the newspapers, "It was my elbow, not my mind, that didn't work last season." If I only knew what was coming.

It was true, though. I'd never had any problems with anxiety or depression. That all changed that night in Syracuse, when I went out and could barely even remember how to pitch. My fingers didn't feel connected to my arms, and my arms didn't feel connected to my body. It was absolutely surreal. My body was changing, right there on the mound, and my world would never

be the same.

### **'You're invincible. Just conquer it'**

This kind of thing really does happen. Some people are born with these psychological issues; others find they crop up later in life. There's some history of this in my family – my mother has taken medication, and her father, too – but I didn't know that in 1997. It was still a dirty little secret.

I got rocked in Syracuse, and it didn't get any better. The cocky kid in me still said, "You're invincible. Just conquer it." But that didn't work anymore. Every five days, what once was so easy – throwing baseballs hard and accurate – became something I could no longer do. Soon I couldn't even imagine doing it. I stood out there having no idea what I was doing, and the results showed it. I went 0-5 with a 7.81 ERA and walked 38 guys in 28 innings.

The Mets talked with me about going down to Class A St. Lucie, but I didn't know how to tell them, "You don't understand. Something's wrong with me." I was from the hardheaded school of never admitting weakness -- not with your arm, and certainly not with your head. So I went to St. Lucie and stunk up the joint there, too. But then I met with Dr. Lans.



Gary I. Rothstein/Icon SMI

With Dave Wallace, left, Pulsipher meets Sandy Koufax in 1998. Four years later, Pulsipher would be tending these fields in Port St. Lucie.

Dr. Allan Lans was the Mets' team psychologist at a time when many organizations didn't bother with that kind of thing. He's a smart man. A caring man. I was getting pretty desperate, so I decided to talk to him. He prescribed Prozac – not as a cure-all, but to make things easier as he and I talked about what was going on with me. I resisted the idea at first but ultimately gave in. It was either that or retire – because I was never going to be able to pitch feeling the way I was.

I did pitch better. But being a cocky guy, I started slacking off taking my pill every day. Dr. Lans kept telling me that monkeying with the medication was really foolish, that it would only make my mood swings worse, but I still didn't take it seriously. It cost me big-time. After I was traded to Milwaukee in mid-1998, separating me from the only organization I ever knew, I slacked off on my medication as my moods spiraled lower and lower. I pitched for the Brewers through 1999 with no fastball, no control, no contact with Dr. Lans and no confidence whatsoever. I can't

believe I let myself pitch in the big leagues like that.

The lowest point came the next spring. I had pitched BP and gone home with my wife, Michelle, who was pregnant with our first child. I went to the bathroom and didn't come back for 15 minutes. Michelle checked on me and found me unconscious on the floor and barely breathing. When she rolled me over, I vomited. She called 911 and I was whisked to the emergency room, where doctors got my heart beating right (it had dropped to just 30 beats a minute) and my breathing normal. I woke up crying.

We never found out what caused it, whether it was an arrhythmia, a mild seizure, maybe dehydration, but I'll bet it was a reaction to ephedra. (I bought the stuff at a store in the mall and took it as fat burner.) It was a temporary episode, but I got farmed out to the minors a few weeks later.

I was distraught. I was only 26 but felt like an old man. I used to be so light, so bouncy. Now I felt as though I was wearing a wet overcoat all the time. My career was fizzling out, and I knew it. "Be careful what you dream," I told the media.

### **The long road back**

I spent the 2000 and 2001 seasons pitching for seven teams in four organizations, usually in the minors. I was throwing complete slop. I was freaked out all the time. I wasn't taking my medication. Every time I thought I had hit my low point, I hit another one. When I hurt my groin with the Yankees' Triple-A Columbus team in 2002, I said, "That's it. I can't do this anymore. I'm done."

I went back to my home in Port St. Lucie, Fla. and took a job, if you can believe this, tending the minor-league fields at the Mets' complex. There was something peaceful about riding the mower for hours across that grass, not feeling the inescapable pressure anymore. I was building mounds on the same fields that once made me a top prospect. It was masochistic, I suppose, but I needed the eight bucks an hour. That was life.

My old groundskeeper friend from the Mets, Tommy Bowes, gave me the job on one condition – that I keep working out. So every other day I threw to another guy there, Randy Mitchell. I gradually felt the love for the game again. I thought of my young son, Liam Hayden Pulsipher. I made his initials LHP for a reason - also my son born later, Leyton Hale – so they could be reminded of who their daddy was, what made him special. Out there on the mower, I decided that I wanted to try being special again.

I signed with the Orioles the following spring. It was during one workout with them that another reliever, Steve Bechler, collapsed during a workout. I was standing about 10 feet from him. When I saw him in the trainer's room 20 minutes later, I knew he wasn't going to make it. I couldn't stop thinking: That could have been me.



AP Photo/James A. Finley

Pulsipher's 10-plus scoreless innings put him back in the big leagues.

I was assigned to Triple-A Ottawa and started feeling awful again. But this time I called Dr. Lans, who had recently left the Mets, and we spoke for hours. He recommended that I try a different medication, Paxil. There aren't big differences between Prozac, Paxil and other antidepressants, but some work differently with different people. I gave Paxil a try, took it every day without question and felt much better. Better enough to not even attempt to hook up with a major-league team. For 2004, I signed with the Long Island Ducks of the independent Atlantic League, just to celebrate my love for the game again.

I pitched really well, and in fact wound up signing with the Mariners' Triple-A team in August, but of course got hurt again after two starts there. (It's always something, huh?) I threw real well in winter ball, too. For those three teams combined, I wound up 20-10 with a 3.75 ERA in 216 total innings. I felt stronger and sharper than at any time in the past 10 years. I really did.

No one wanted me. I had signed to play with Tijuana of the Mexican League this year when I was talking to Jason Isringhausen on the phone. He said he would look into getting me a non-roster invite with the Cardinals. They trusted his judgment of my situation, how taking Paxil regularly had unleashed my old self, and on Feb. 18, I was in Jupiter opening camp with Tony La Russa's Cardinals.

This spring went incredibly well. One inning at a time, I kept getting hitters out. I wound up not giving up a run in 10 appearances. As my competition kept getting cut or optioned out, it looked as though I would definitely make the team. Then, just a few days before camp broke, a line drive smoked me right in the foot and broke my left pinkie toe. I told them to just cut the little bugger off.

It didn't come to that. On April 4, the day before the season started, La Russa called me into his office and sat me down.

"How's your leg?" he asked.

"Good. Ready to go," I said.

"You ready to compete?"

"Yes."

"You had a great spring training," he said, making me worried about what would come next.

"That's all well and good. But now it's Chapter One of a new season.

"You're with us. Go get 'em."

I got up and shook his hand. "Thank you," I said, "It's an honor."

I was back.

### **Never be afraid to ask for help**

I can't possibly explain how much I want to do well for the Cardinals. They have given me a job to do, to get lefties out in key situations, and I want to repay that trust over and over and over. It doesn't matter what my story is. What my past is. Every time I go out there, I have to keep earning that job like everyone else.

But I'm not like everyone else, and I admit it. I still have to take my prescription every day -- I keep it in my spikes so I never forget when I get to the ballpark. I probably won't need to take it when I retire because my anxiety crops up only around baseball. In the meantime, I'll continue to weigh a pretty bulky 245 pounds, a good deal of that a Paxil side effect. But you know what? The best side effect of all is being out on the mound again.

I've learned so much throughout all this. I've learned that depression and anxiety is a real, medical issue. It can be treated, if you know how to ask for other people's help. Is there a stigma to seeing a psychiatrist and taking medication? I'd be lying if I said there wasn't, particularly in sports, but who cares? Would you rather be miserable all the time?

I hope that my story can help others get over that stigma. Only a few professional athletes have ever talked about depression openly, and I want to be at the forefront.

I guarantee you that dozens of young players, and parents of those players, are reading this right now and wondering, "Wow. Is that what I've been feeling all this time? And there's something I can do about it?" I'm here to tell you there is -- if you open your mind to what's going on inside it.

If you know someone who's having problems like mine, please show them this story. Let them know that help is there for them. Heck, come to a Cardinals game and yell for me during BP. I'll try to come over and tell you what I can.

Some have thought my career was a waste, and in some ways maybe they're right. But I think my career, right now, could be more important than ever.