

'I could not stand being alone in my brain': Islanders goalie Robin Lehner opens up about his addiction and bipolar diagnosis

By Robin Lehner

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Editor's note: Robin Lehner is a nine-year NHL veteran goaltender. The 27-year-old Sweden native signed a one-year deal with the New York Islanders in July.

March 29, 2018 was the day my life would change forever. It all started the night before. I made a phone call to my goalie coach with the Sabres, Andrew Allen. I told him that I was personally in a bad place and was not sure that I would be able to play in the game we had the next day. I was having trouble making up my mind if I could suit up. I was mentally and physically battling a lot of things. The conversation ended with him telling me we could talk about it in person at the rink in the morning. When I arrived, I said I was good to go... as I always did.

I was not good to go.

The game began as usual, but a few minutes in I noticed I was feeling very exhausted. I didn't have a ton of action, so I was starting to feel a little worried. As the period continued, I started to feel some pain in my chest and I was breathing heavily. During the intermission as I came back into the room, I really felt something was wrong. I sat with our trainer in a side office and started to calm down a little. I thought I was able to get back in for the second. Maybe I was just tired.

The second period began and everything started to get worse. That pain in my chest now felt more like pressure. Towards the end of the period, things started to get blurry and I couldn't focus. I felt very fuzzy, but I battled like I always did. The scoreboard clock was ticking down so slowly. I just wanted to get back to the locker room. When zero finally hit, I walked back and sat in the trainer's room. I could barely get my gear off. I broke down. I was having a major, full-blown panic attack. I thought I was suffering a heart attack. I had no idea what was happening. I could not go back on the ice.

Our doctors and trainers were able to calm me down. Our GM Jason Botterill came down from the press box to check on me. He was pretty concerned. I don't know if this made things better or worse in terms of the anxiety I was feeling. I don't remember much after that. After checking with our team doctors, I was sent home to get away from the rink. I was not going to the hospital because the media along with everyone else would find out and I did not want that. I felt so drained both physically and mentally. Everything hurt. On my way home, I did the one thing that was common for me ... I stopped to grab beer. I went home

and drank ... and drank. I finally woke up my wife in the middle of the night and said the five words I never had the courage to say.

I have to go away.

With those words, I'll go back to that dark place I talked about in the first part of this story. This dark place is full of self-medication and thoughts of suicide. The phone call I made to Andrew the night before? I was drunk. I wanted to kill myself. I was extremely close multiple times. The battle playing hockey was nothing compared to the battle inside my brain. It was at its worst.

Since the new year began I had been feeling severely depressed and my drinking increased. I was heavily drinking a case of beer a day just to settle the demons in my mind and then took pills to sleep. I was self-treating myself because I could not be inside my own head by myself. The thoughts of ending it all ... it was real and close.

So close that weeks before that game in March, I met with my lawyer Frank. He had suggested we sit down and go through some things I needed to do to get my life back on track. Frank mentioned life insurance to me at one time and it came to me I needed to have a larger policy. It was then that he asked if I had a drinking problem. I had clarity for a moment to ask myself where I was. I haven't been there for my wife and kids nor for myself. I finally realized I needed help and would come to find out I had no clue what I needed. But I know one thing: If it wasn't for Frank I probably wouldn't have gone to rehab. He gave me that last push.

I contacted "the program" supported by the NHL and the NHLPA. I told them I needed help, but I never let on to the severity of the situation. No one knew. After some discussions, the plan was to take steps once the season was over, which was only a few weeks away. I thought I could deal, but March 29 changed everything.



Lehner allows a goal during that fateful March 29th game. Photo by Bill Wippert/NHLI via Getty Images

When I told my wife that night, she was happy. My wife had tried so many times in the past to make me stop and wanted me to get help. I never wanted to listen. She was also scared for me. While I had been thinking about suicide, she had been witnessing that process right in front of her for years. I know she always wanted to help, but I never wanted to show any sign of weakness. What a terrible thing to put someone through. I don't think I wanted to get help because of my additional problems overall. I was addicted to alcohol and drugs and I didn't want to stop. I couldn't.

It was true powerlessness. I was aware of the pain this caused my family, but still could not stop doing it. I wasn't in control of my own mind. It always had a reason and excuse to do whatever it felt like it wanted. I wished there was something else I knew I could do other than abusing pills and alcohol. There always was, but I never had the courage to get help. I was scared. What was going to happen to my career and everyone's perception of me?

It finally didn't matter. I was going to rehab for myself and my family. It was the one thing I have done in my life that made me feel like a true man.

The call was made back to the program. I couldn't wait any more. It's a call I never had the courage to make before. I needed to go now. The few days that I was given away from the

rink before I left, I drank ... a lot. So, I was set up to go to Arizona to one of the best treatment centers in North America for addiction and trauma. In the airport ready to fly, I sat by myself with a hoodie over my head drinking beers. At that point I thought I had only two options. Get on that plane and do this or end this once and for all now.

I got on the plane.

When I arrived, I was put into a small room to help sober up and ween off everything in my body. Besides the drinking and other pills, did I mention I had been taking sleeping pills to sleep almost every night for seven years? My detox lasted three weeks in that room. I was told my detox was one of the worst that they had seen. I had not had an honest sleep in so long, my mind was in shock. I was hallucinating, fighting demons in my mind and having extreme and vivid dreams. I was stuck in a constant state of REM sleep and the dreams kept waking me up and making things worse. Sleep was only in short spurts. I was truly living on autopilot for three weeks in a constant fog.



Photo by Len Redkoles/NHLI via Getty Images

It was during all this that the doctors realized that my situation went beyond addiction. They started to dig as they do. The doctors, having knowledge of past issues, moved me to the

regular rooms when I was cleaned from the detox phase. I was in a group with mostly members of the military and made several new friends. I would come to find out later how similar things were between us all in the group. I got a whole new perspective of what they go through and what a sacrifice it truly is to be a part of the military.

There were a lot of things growing up that I dealt with and were surrounded by. I saw and experienced things I want to forget. My personal battle was now complicated by my own childhood experiences of abuse, addiction and mental illness. Growing up was a seemingly endless wave of horrible violations. I started drinking young and was around a lot of the wrong people. My family surrounded me with the stress of addicts and other nefarious people on a day-to-day basis. The good relationships I had were impossible to keep because my family kept pushing them away. It was an all too comfortable environment within a very bad part of the world. I was left with many regrets and a lot of true friendships wasted.

Five weeks into treatment and I was diagnosed bipolar 1 with manic phases.

Now all this is not the sole reason for bad decisions I have made in life, but they were definitely affecting my mental state in ways that I did not realize. During the treatment I went through stages of grief, anger, sadness and hopelessness. I was broken and they were trying to put me together. My mind had been tricked into thinking that the terrible things that had happened to me were somehow OK. I didn't try to change it. It was what I was used to.

For a long time, I always lived at the extremes mentally — manic and hyper-manic and depressed. What that means is the highs are high and the lows, well very low, and the depression is awful.

When I am manic I usually feel great, but I make a lot of impulse decisions and dangerous mistakes. When I was on the manic extreme I didn't care about any type of consequence or repercussions. I didn't care about anything that was going on around me. My ego thrived and my personality changed. I thought I was the best at everything and all my thoughts were the right ones. I was usually an easy person to be around at these manic stages. I had lots of energy and didn't need much sleep. I would never take pregame naps and my confidence was at its peak.

Then the other extreme was depression, which was total hell. I could not function properly performing basic life skills without a lot of effort. If I really needed to get something done and didn't want to really do it, it would not happen. Family didn't matter. Nothing did. I was always so paranoid in this stage. I felt that everyone was against me and wanted to hurt me. I was constantly angry, irritated and tired. The depression didn't just affect my mind but also my body. I was physically hurting every day. I didn't want to practice. I barely wanted to play in games.

I managed to get through it all, but it wasn't easy for me. And it was even harder for those around me. My brain was going in all different directions and I could not focus on anything.

All these feelings mixed in together were finally all too much. I wanted to die. I could not handle it. I had tried to have this hidden from people around me. The only one that truly understood my pain was my wife and she still didn't know everything.

The drinking and pills I was taking were to bring me down and "even me out." Nothing else worked to calm down my brain. When I had a concussion in Ottawa, the only thing that helped me feel better during that time was to drink. I knew that was not good to do, but it was the only thing that would take away my headaches. No one was aware of my need to drink or to take sleeping pills until I would pass out. I could not stand being alone in my brain at night time.

As I said, the doctors dug deep. So deep, I felt I could not function. I made the decision to stay an additional four weeks for additional treatment. I was scared to leave the doors. I was told if I ever drank again, I would probably die. Now, that mattered.

The next few weeks in there would be life altering. I started to get very emotional and determined. I wanted to feel happiness. I had not felt real happiness in a long time. I deserved better for myself and so did my family. I started to make a lot of big life decisions during this time.

The Meadows in Arizona helped map out my life and it was something I never had the courage to do. I always just suppressed things with substances, impulsive thoughts and behavior. The therapists went through my whole life and opened my eyes to what truly happened. For truly the first time, I found religion. I was baptized in Arizona during this time. This new faith is what helped me through. This was truly one of the best things that ever happened to me and I have to thank Pastor Greg for that.

Today, I am here a happy man, that is for the first time, trying to live in the moment, day to day.

The only way I was leaving those doors was when I was 100 percent certain that I was going to make it. I never want to make my family go through anything like that again. They deserve a dad and my wife, a real husband. If I felt I could not give them that, I wanted to die. I could not let happen what I did to my wife again. There was never domestic violence, but the mental suffering over the years watching her husband killing himself slowly was brutal. When I was away, she was never sure I was going to come home.

I got to speak to my wife often on the phone during treatment. My family came and saw me in treatment during the last week. When I saw my kids for the first time after this ... I broke

down. I was ready to really be a husband and dad for the first time. I was finally ready to love and feel love.



Lehner and his son prior to practice at Citi Field last New Year's Eve. Photo by Bruce Bennett/Getty Images

Life does go on living without you being around. One of the hardest things now was getting back to hockey. I am an addict that was diagnosed as bipolar and ADHD with PTSD and trauma. I had never had a sober season of hockey my entire career. With those manic swings, I could see the pattern. When I was hypomanic and in a good mood, I was a solid goalie. The depressive state, not so much.

But now there is a new reality. I can focus on my career.

During this whole process our GM in Buffalo was so incredibly supportive. We met when I came back and had a great and productive discussion. Jason and the Sabres organization had decided to move on from me as their goalie and, in the end, my family and I thought a restart would be the best thing. I still wanted to stay if they wanted me. But deep inside I knew changing scenery would be the best thing for my recovery. Now what to do. My

relationship with Jason didn't end in that meeting. He contacted me during the summer a few times to check in on me. His check-ins still continue today, despite me not being on his team.

My agent received a few calls, which was encouraging, but most teams were hesitant because I had a reputation. Those meetings with teams were some of the hardest things I've had to do in my life, now sober. I couldn't tell them I was bipolar. I couldn't tell them anything.

One meeting in particular was worse than any other. I was bombarded with questions about why I was a bad person or a bad teammate and I couldn't say anything. I just took it for hours. I was told that I was a bad influence and I had less than one chance or I would be buried in the minors and that would end my career. Sitting and hearing from these people who don't know me and think that I am a bad person was extremely hard. I was crushed.

The scary thing was all I wanted to do after these horrible meetings was to drink. I was put down for so long and could not defend myself, all from fear of my diagnosis going public. After one meeting, I was in the airport staring at the bar, so I picked up my phone and spoke to friends and my wife for a long time to get through it. I walked past that bar and got on the plane sober.

I never got an offer and learned through the media that the teams I had met with had signed other goalies. My faith that I didn't have before rehab was now being tested. It all changed when I got a call from Lou Lamoriello and the Islanders. I had two great meetings with him and, looking back now, those meetings became some of the of the best moments in my life. We talked about family and life.

The Islanders were ready to take a chance with me. I was relieved that I could start a new chapter. When I was finally offered the deal, I was so happy. I finally had someone who believed in me, now sober.

The one thing that was still making me nervous was that bipolar stigma. I didn't understand why I was so ashamed to say anything. Would I lose my job? I finally was able to gather enough courage to talk about this with management. To my surprise, they were very accepting, knowing that I would still need more help at certain times. With my last GM checking in on me, my new one working with me, I am finally beginning to find a place of comfort without having to find something to make everything go away.

I am truly ready to battle now.

I cannot say enough about the NHLPA/NHL substance abuse program. I don't think I would be alive without them. Dan Cronin, Dave Lewis and Dr. Shaw have done so many amazing things for my family and me during this time. They were out visiting me every week to make sure I was OK. They check on me all the time on the phone. I owe them so much. I can't thank my wife and family enough for their support. My close friends checking up on me and

my friend and lawyer, Frank Muggia, who came to visit me through all of this. I owe so much to every single one of them.

It's important to know that I am not blaming any of my actions in the past on my conditions or diagnosis. I take ownership of what I have done. I let myself become what I was. I never had the courage to get help earlier.

I am not sharing this story to make people think differently of Robin Lehner as a professional goalie. I want to help make a difference and help others the way I have been helped. I want people to know that there is hope in desperation, there is healing in facing an ugly past and there is no shame in involving others in your battle.

My journey is still new. Every day is a battle and each day a new chance to grow as a man. It is time to take the "crazy person" stamp from bipolar disorder. I am working hard to become the latest to battle this unfair stigma. Our battle together is just beginning.

And now that I have begun my battle with what's behind me, it's time to battle what's in front of me.