

Your Employee and Family Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Living with Bipolar Disorder

Whether it's disappointment over a lost job or excitement about a new relationship, mood changes are a natural part of life. While there are ups and downs, most people ultimately feel a sense of control over life's emotional currents. But what if your experience is different? What if you or a loved one grapples for control or is completely oblivious to the extreme intensity of severe mood swings? For people diagnosed with bipolar disorder, this emotional unpredictability can wreak havoc on their work or home life and in their relationships.

A diagnosis of bipolar disorder can disrupt the lives of both the person affected by the condition and close family and friends, especially since the stigma of mental illness remains an unfortunate reality of our society. Times are changing though, and while it may not be an ideal situation, a definitive diagnosis can ensure the person affected by bipolar disorder gets the help and support needed to cope.

Understanding the Signs and Symptoms

For sufferers, shifting moods happen often and intensely, and may not be caused by changes in situation or the impact of life events. Instead, they suffer serious bouts of depression followed by intense highs, known as mania. The lack of control over these moods can further complicate the situation by causing intense distress.

Symptoms of **mania** include:

- Feelings of euphoria, extreme optimism, exaggerated self-esteem
- Rapid speech, racing thoughts
- Decreased need for sleep
- Extreme irritability
- Impulsive and potentially reckless behavior

Signs of the **depression** phase of bipolar disorder include:

- Feeling worthless, helpless or hopeless
- Sleeping or eating more or less than usual
- Trouble concentrating or making decisions
- Loss of interest in previously enjoyed activities
- Decreased sex drive
- Avoiding other people
- Overwhelming feelings of sadness or grief
- Feeling unreasonably guilty
- Loss of energy, feeling very tired
- Thoughts of death or suicide

If you are experiencing similar symptoms, contact your physician or a mental health professional right away for diagnosis and treatment options.

Dealing with Diagnosis

Knowledge really is power, and now that you have your diagnosis, you can take action to make your life happier and healthier. Here are some important next steps for living with bipolar disorder.

Maintain your treatment. Your medical team will work with you to create an action plan that will help you manage the condition as effectively as possible. A comprehensive treatment plan usually includes medication, to help stabilize your mood, psychotherapy, education and a healthy lifestyle. Once stabilized many sufferers are tempted to go off their medication, wrongly believing they no longer need it. If you have any questions or concerns regarding the treatment plan recommended to you by your doctor and/or other mental health professionals co-ordinating your treatment, we strongly encourage you to speak with them directly. Sticking with your treatment plan — one that you and your doctor(s) have worked out and continually collaborate on — is the best way to keep symptoms in check.

Inform your family. When diagnosed, you may feel shame or embarrassment, but by educating your family and friends about bipolar disorder, you can help remove the stigma attached to it. Because symptoms of bipolar disorder can negatively affect relationships, be open and honest with your loved ones about your condition and symptoms, treatment options and how they can support you on the road to recovery.

Act as your own advocate. Learn everything you can about bipolar disorder. Know the symptoms so you can spot them when they arise and share them with your doctor. Talk candidly with your doctor about all the treatment options available to you and be sure to ask any questions you have.

Track your triggers. Keep note of what feelings or circumstances come before a manic or depressive mood. Being able to identify triggers can help you avoid them or manage them better when they happen.

Hold onto hope. It will get better. It may take time to find the exact treatment balance but you will get there.

Connect with your kids. If you have children, talk to them about your symptoms, treatment and experience. Be sure to connect them with the support they need to understand and live with bipolar disorder, whether it’s through family or individual counseling or a support group for kids.

Get extra help. As with any life challenge, a strong network including support groups, counseling as well as friends and family are great resources that you can gain information and help from.

Supporting a Loved One with Bipolar Disorder

As a friend or family member of a person diagnosed with bipolar disorder, you can play a vital role in supporting your loved one on the road to recovery.

Track treatment. You can be a huge influence and positive force in the life of your loved one simply by encouraging him or her to stick with consistent treatment.

Become an advocate. Educate yourself about the disorder so you can recognize the symptoms, understand treatment options and help your loved one get the care needed to manage the disorder as effectively as possible. If your loved one is feeling frustrated by "the system," or feels he or she isn’t get straight answers from doctors, offer to attend medical appointments with them (where appropriate).

Get the support you need. It can be difficult for family members and friends to understand bipolar disorder and how to best support their loved one — especially when grappling with the negative effects symptoms can have on your own life. Whether it’s confiding in a close friend, attending a support group or seeking help from a counselor, having someone to go to for advice — or to listen without judgement — can help ease some of the pressure bipolar behaviors may be having on your own life.

Understanding the signs and symptoms, getting the right treatment and seeking support are all integral to managing bipolar disorder. It’s truly a lifelong process. While it’s not an easy journey, proper diagnosis and treatment can go a long way in restoring a healthy life balance for everyone involved.

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