

# HEALTHY APPROACH TO BIPOLAR DISORDER: LIFESTYLE CONSIDERATIONS

SOURCE: ORGANIZATION FOR BIPOLAR AFFECTIVE DISORDER (OBAD)

Being diagnosed with bipolar disorder is like having any other serious medical condition. It means being more careful in how you live your life. A healthy diet, regular exercise, proper sleep, prescribed medications, limited alcohol and drug use, and a reduction of stress are not just words but words to live by.

## Medication Compliance

One of the ironies of the medications taken to improve our functioning is that the side effects sometimes make us feel physically worse than the illness itself. What you need to know is there are many different types of medications available. You don't have to live with a side effect that makes your quality of life unacceptable. If you are experiencing this type of reaction, talk to your doctor: they will be able to change medications or reduce the dosage to make the side effects more manageable. Too many people stop taking medications for this reason; don't let it be you.

## Limit Alcohol and Drug Use

Research has shown that continued abuse of alcohol and/or a dependence on street drugs - even marijuana - could alter the course of the illness. If you need help in dealing with this problem, there are agencies and groups available. Consult a phone directory for services.

## Monitor Sleep

Normal sleep occurs with fatigue and reduced stimulation. However, if excessive electrical impulses are triggered, disorganization, increased chemical release,

and altered brain functioning occurs resulting in sleeplessness (or insomnia). In bipolar disorder, loss of sleep can precipitate or exacerbate an episode of hypomania or the more severe, mania. Some researchers believe that losing a single night of sleep for any reason may be enough to trigger mania. It is critical to monitor your sleep and ensure that you are receiving adequate sleep every night. For most individuals this means approximately 6 - 8 hours.

Likewise if you are sleeping too much, this could be contributing to an episode of depression.

Researchers reported that events that may result in a loss of sleep precipitate a manic episode. They further reported that the likelihood of a manic episode could be reduced by following regular daily routines and by involving family members.

The Canadian Sleep Institute recommends the following 10 steps for a better sleep:

1. Schedule a relaxing period before going to sleep to separate your body and mind from the day's hassles.
2. Use your bedroom primarily for sex and sleep, and not as an all-purpose activity arena.
3. Your bed should be comfortable, large enough, in a quiet, dark room, and at the right temperature.
4. Keep a regular schedule, going to bed and getting up at the same time each day. Don't go to bed until you feel sleepy.
5. Be consistent about taking naps. Take





one regularly or not at all.

6. Exercise regularly in the morning or early afternoon, but do not engage in a strenuous activity late in the evening. A mild, relaxing activity might be helpful close to bedtime.
7. Assess your caffeine intake and avoid caffeine after 2pm. Smoking close to bedtime or at night causes further sleep disruption.
8. Don't use alcohol or street drugs as sedatives. While they might help you initially fall asleep, they lead to sleep disruption and deprive you of deep sleep, at times for years after stopping heavy use.
9. If you feel hungry in the evening, have a light snack or a glass of milk. Heavy meals close to bedtime can result in discomfort and further sleep disturbance.
10. Above all, don't try too hard. If you can't fall asleep, don't lie in bed anxious and frustrated. Leave your bedroom to read, watch television, or do something else to relax, going back to bed only when you feel sleepy again.

## Nutrition

A balanced intake of food is needed to provide vitamins and nutrients. Food is then digested, absorbed, and circulated as glucose or other chemicals to all cells of the body to use for energy, growth, and repair. Because nutrients cannot be adequately stored, frequent replenishment is necessary to meet cell needs. With inadequate nutritional intake, malabsorption, or other illnesses, malnutrition and vitamin deficiency occur resulting in various states of disease. This can

cause impaired growth and impaired healing, as well as numerous cellular changes. Vitamins and caloric agents provide the nutrients absent from daily consumption to maintain normal metabolic function, growth, and repair. They also treat diseases caused by impaired daily nutrition. Water intake is especially important as an adequate supply can combat fatigue.

## Fitness

Regular exercise should be a part of your daily living. Exercise increases your metabolism by increasing oxygen intake. The resultant increase in endorphins enhances one's feeling of well-being. Moderate exercise like walking, cycling, or swimming will help you maintain mental health. Fresh air, sunshine, and social interaction are added benefits. So 'Get with the Program'.

## Coping Strategies

### Build A Therapeutic Partnership with Your Doctor

The progress that individuals make in therapy is contingent upon a positive therapeutic relationship. This may be more important even than the type of therapy used.

Characteristics that are important in developing a healthy and therapeutic relationship between patients and their doctors are described next.

You can't do this alone, yet you are the only one that can help yourself sounds contradictory, but it's true. Unless you take the steps to make yourself informed about





your condition, you will forever be subject to its whims. And one of the very best ways to inform yourself is through peers that have been there, done that. This is the basis for Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and other successful peer support programs. Once you talk with others who have had all the questions and fears that you have, you can then begin to advocate for yourself. Your rights as a person do not change with a diagnosis, but the method to ensure them often does.

## Patient's Interactions With Doctor

**Insight:** The patient can understand how his/her disorder, attitudes, and behaviours affect his/her life rapport. The patient and doctor seem to 'click' with one another.

**Empathy:** An empathetic doctor tries to understand the situations and feelings through the patient's eyes.

**Honesty:** The patient can discuss his/her symptoms and/or situation.

**Trust:** The patient views that therapeutic relationship as helpful and the doctor finds the patient interested in changing.

**Confidentiality:** A doctor keeps what is said in therapy between himself and the patient, except when the patient or others are in danger.

**Persistence:** The patient is willing to make a commitment to work at getting better.

**Unconditional Positive Regard:** A doctor does not treat a patient in a judgmental way.

## Personal Survival Tips

### Build A Strong Support System

It is important to build a strong support system. This means surrounding yourself with individuals who have your best interests at heart, individuals you trust and respect. For your support system to work, you must be willing to hear and accept their support and judgments regarding your mental health: at times you might not be well enough to distinguish whether you are in the midst of an episode.

### Time Management - Add Structure To Your Life

Due to the nature of this condition, it is very important to add structure to your life. This includes regular sleep and wake times, scheduled meal times, exercise, and social activities. Try to avoid 'overbooking' your life. When individuals are manic, they often underestimate the time it takes to complete a task or project and the pressure to perform increases. When depressed, individuals often lack the energy or ability to maintain a regular schedule. This is a vicious circle the less you accomplish, the worse you may feel. Try to focus your energies; remember if you get sick, you accomplish nothing.

## Financial Management

### Prepare a budget - learn to live within your means

If you are on a fixed or limited income you may want to take advantage of budgeting





and financial management services offered by various community agencies. They can help you live within your means and reduce the trauma and stress of unpaid bills.

## Make financial decisions before episodes occur

If you have a history of excessive spending during episodes, you may want to explore the possibility of someone else managing your finances. You may also wish to put limits on your spending by decreasing your credit card and bank withdrawal limits. Recovering from an episode of mania is difficult without the added stress of financial loss.

## Write A Personal Directive

Make a "Living Will". It allows you input during times of wellness for periods when you are unable to make appropriate life decisions.

## Create A Mood Chart

Bipolar disorder is a cyclic disorder meaning that episodes may be seasonal, or they may follow a pattern of some kind. By charting your moods over a period of time, you will gain insight into what may be times of concern. This will allow you to take a proactive approach to your treatment plan, i.e., if you become depressed in the winter, you may want to add an antidepressant in late fall.

There are several items you can track in addition to your mood. You could make notes on when you have taken your pills, how much sleep you have been getting, and any outside factors that may be influencing your

mood. The more information you have on your condition, the greater your chances of keeping the severe episodes to a minimum.

## Employment Issues

One of the most common questions asked is, "Should I tell my new or existing employer about my condition?"

To be honest there is no easy answer for this question. In numerous discussions over this issue there have been many different real-life examples. Sometimes people are fired or set-up for failure. Other times employers are understanding and try to assist you as best they can. This is a very tough choice for an employer to make, especially a small business owner who relies on everybody to get the job done. If your condition will require you to miss a significant amount of time, they don't always have the luxury of a replacement available. Try and find a job that allows for some flexibility to accommodate your condition.

The second most frequently asked question is, "Should I tell my co-workers about my condition?"

Some of the stigmas surrounding mental illness are being removed, but they are still very much alive. If you choose to tell a co-worker, you will open yourself up to a wide variety of not so pleasant gossip. Because we are only human, we want to share our troubles with others; however, with our condition we are vulnerable to societies' preconceived opinions.

Work can increase our self-esteem and make us a part of the community in which we live.





Know your limitations and find a career that can accommodate your unique 'gifts'.

"Recovery ... A Journey Filled with Hope."

