

DEALING EFFECTIVELY WITH BIPOLAR DISORDER

SOURCE: DEPRESSION AND BIPOLAR SUPPORT ALLIANCE (DBSA)

What is bipolar disorder?

Bipolar disorder, also known as manic depression, is a mood disorder, a medical illness characterized by changes in mood, thought, energy, and behavior. It causes a person's mood to alternate between the extremes of depression and mania.

Symptoms of depression include:

- 👂 Prolonged sadness or unexplained crying spells
- 👂 Significant changes in appetite and sleep patterns
- 👂 Irritability, anger, worry, agitation, anxiety
- 👂 Pessimism, indifference
- 👂 Loss of energy, persistent lethargy
- 👂 Unexplained aches and pains
- 👂 Feelings of guilt, worthlessness and/or hopelessness
- 👂 Inability to concentrate, indecisiveness
- 👂 Inability to take pleasure in former interests, social withdrawal
- 👂 Excessive consumption of alcohol or use of chemical substances
- 👂 Recurring thoughts of death or suicide

Symptoms of mania include:

- 👂 Increased physical and mental activity and energy
- 👂 Heightened mood, exaggerated optimism, and self-confidence
- 👂 Excessive irritability, aggressive behavior
- 👂 Decreased need for sleep without experiencing fatigue
- 👂 Grandiose delusions, inflated sense of self-importance
- 👂 Racing speech, racing thoughts, flight of ideas

- 👂 Impulsiveness, poor judgment, distractibility
- 👂 Reckless behavior such as spending sprees, rash business decisions, erratic driving, and sexual indiscretions
- 👂 In the most severe cases, delusions, and hallucinations

Bipolar disorder is treatable. With the right combination of medication and/or talk therapy, you can stabilize the moods that interfere with your life. By using self-help skills and strategies that work with your treatment plans, you can experience levels of wellness, stability, and recovery you may never have thought possible.

Key Recovery Concepts

Six key concepts provide the foundation of effective recovery work. They are:

1. **Hope.** With good symptoms management, it is possible to experience long periods of wellness. Believing that you can cope with bipolar disorder is both accurate and essential to recovery.
2. **Perspective.** Bipolar disorder often follows a cyclical pattern. Although you may go through some painful times and it may be difficult to believe things will get better, it is important not to give up hope.
3. **Personal Responsibility.** It's up to you to take action to keep your moods stabilized. This includes asking for help from others when you need it, taking your medication as prescribed, and keeping appointments with your health care providers.
4. **Self-Advocacy.** Become an effective advocate for yourself so you can get the





services and treatment you need and make the life you want for yourself.

5. **Education.** Learn all you can about your illness. This allows you to make informed decisions about all aspects of your life and treatment.
6. **Support.** Working toward wellness is up to you. However, support from others is essential to maintaining your stability and enhancing the quality of your life.

Beginning The Journey

As you begin your journey to recovery, there are three important things you should do for yourself:

Seek good medical care. At least once a year, and whenever your symptoms change or worsen, have a complete physical examination. This will determine if a medical problem is causing or increasing your symptoms.

When you see your doctor, take a written listing of:

- 🗨️ All medications and health care preparations you are taking.
- 🗨️ Any new, unusual, uncomfortable, or painful symptoms, and when you experience them.
- 🗨️ Any questions you need to ask your doctor about the above or other issues. Be prepared to take notes on your doctor's answers.

Manage your medications carefully by taking the following steps:

- 🗨️ Learn about your medications, how they work, what to expect, possible side effects,

and dietary/lifestyle restrictions. Take them only as prescribed.

- 🗨️ Use a daily reminder/medication saver system to make sure you are taking all the necessary medications.
- 🗨️ Throw away old medications or those you are no longer taking.
- 🗨️ Realize that medications work best when you are making other healthy choices. Don't expect a pill to fix a bad diet, lack of exercise, or an abusive or chaotic lifestyle.
- 🗨️ Reduce or discontinue the use of alcohol. Alcohol is a depressant and makes recovery even more difficult. It can also interfere with the way your medication works.

Seek psychotherapy (talk therapy).


- 🗨️ Choose a psychotherapist with whom you feel comfortable.
- 🗨️ Work with your psychotherapist to find a treatment plan that works.
- 🗨️ Stay in touch with your psychotherapist and other health care providers. "Booster" visits can be useful in keeping symptoms from returning.

Monitoring and Responding to Symptoms

Through careful observation, you will learn what you need to do every day to keep yourself well. You will also gain the ability to recognize external events that may trigger an increase in symptoms, and you will be better able to spot early warning signs of an episode and symptoms that indicate you are in trouble.

With this knowledge and perspective, use the tools listed here and others you have discovered for yourself. You will be able to





develop a system for monitoring and responding to symptoms that will help you keep your moods stabilized.

This system should include:

- Daily routines you need to follow to stay well, such as eating three healthy meals, getting adequate sleep, limiting or avoiding alcohol, and exercising regularly.
- A plan for coping with external events that can trigger symptoms, such as an argument with a friend or an unexpected bill, and ways to cope with these events and keep them from causing or worsening your symptoms.
- A way to spot early warning signs, such as irritability, changes in sleep patterns, or anxiety, that indicate your symptoms may be worsening.
- A way to recognize symptoms that indicate real trouble, such as reckless behavior, isolation, or suicidal thoughts.
- A response plan for dealing with warning and/or trouble signs, concrete actions you can quickly take to stabilize your situation, such as calling a doctor, therapist or trusted friend, or arranging a brief hospital stay to stabilize your mood.

Wellness Toolbox

The following practices may help you to maintain wellness as you develop a system for monitoring and responding to symptoms:

- Attend a local support group regularly. If there is no group in your community, call a mood disorders association and they will help you start one.

- Talk to your doctor, therapist, or other health care professional regularly, especially when you are having trouble.
- Share talking and listening time with a friend often, especially during difficult times.
- Do exercises that help you relax, focus, and reduce stress.
- Take a walk each day regardless of the weather. This keeps you in touch with the elements and connects you to the world around you.
- Develop problem-solving skills you can depend on.
- Participate in fun, affirming, and creative activities.
- Record your thoughts and feelings in a journal.
- Create a daily planning calendar.
- Limit alcohol and avoid illegal drugs.
- Keep a regular sleep schedule.
- Improve your diet. Avoid caffeine, sugar, and heavily salted foods.
- Seek opportunities to be exposed to light.
- Try to maintain a calming, safe environment.
- When you are confronted with troubling circumstances, stop, analyze your situation, and make a positive choice.

Crisis Planning

Prepare a personal crisis plan to be used if your symptoms become so severe and/or dangerous that you need others to take over responsibility for your care. Your crisis plan may include:

- A list of your supporters, their roles in your life and their phone numbers.
- A list of all medications you are taking and information on why you are taking them,





and the name and telephone number of your doctor and pharmacy.

🗨️ A list of symptoms that may indicate the need for supporters to make decisions for you and take over responsibility for your care, such as:

- Uncontrollable pacing
- Severe, irritable depression
- Inability to stop compulsive behaviors
- Self-destructive behavior
- Abusive or violent behavior
- Substance abuse
- Thoughts or threats of suicide
- Significant changes in sleep patterns - inability to sleep or difficulty getting out of bed
- Refusal of food
- Instructions that tell your supporters what you need them to do for you.
- Directions for care of your children and/or pets in the event of hospitalization.

🗨️ Directions for notifying your employer in the event of your hospitalization and what he or she should be told.

🗨️ A list of medications that have worked in the past to stabilize you in crisis situations and a list of any medications you do not wish to take, doctors you do not wish to see, and hospitals where you do not wish to be treated.

Give completed copies of your plan to your supporters and explain your needs to them. Update your plan as needed. A local support group can help develop your plan. You may also want to consult your health care provider to determine whether you should develop a medical advance directive and consult legal counsel to determine if a

statement of Power-of-Attorney is appropriate.

Addressing Traumatic Issues

If you feel traumatic events are causing or worsening your symptoms, seek a treatment program or additional support group that:

- 🗨️ Validates your experiences
- 🗨️ Empowers you to take positive action on your own behalf
- 🗨️ Helps you establish a connection with other people

Suicide Prevention

Bipolar disorder is a serious illness that can be life-threatening. People with bipolar disorder who do not receive effective treatment may have a suicide rate as high as 20%. Your life is important, and you can help yourself stay well by adhering to the following strategies:

- 🗨️ Treat your symptoms early. Don't wait until you are in a complete funk to act. Seek help from a qualified mental health care provider that you trust and respect.
- 🗨️ Set up a system with others so you are never alone when you are deeply depressed or feeling out of control.
- 🗨️ Have regularly scheduled health care appointments and keep them.
- 🗨️ Throw away all old medications that you no longer use. Have firearms or other things you could use to harm yourself locked away where you do not have access to them.
- 🗨️ Always keep pictures of your favorite people in visible locations.





- 🧠 Instruct a close supporter to take away your credit cards, cheque books and car keys when you are feeling suicidal.
- 🧠 Make plans that you can look forward to, and try to keep the present in perspective, remembering that the painful times will not last forever.

Developing a Wellness Lifestyle

The way we live our daily lives has a strong impact on how we manage our moods and minimize our symptoms. Develop a lifestyle that supports your overall wellness by:

- 🧠 Using therapy and educational materials to improve your self-esteem and change negative thoughts and beliefs into positive ones.
- 🧠 Enhancing your life with things pets, music, and activities that make you feel good.
- 🧠 Receiving treatment for an alcohol or substance abuse problem, if necessary.
- 🧠 Having a comfortable living space where you feel safe and content.

- 🧠 Establishing a career or hobby that you enjoy.
- 🧠 Discovering a passion and becoming engaged in it.
- 🧠 Keeping your life calm and peaceful.
- 🧠 Taking good care of yourself.
- 🧠 Eating well, getting plenty of rest, and exercising regularly.
- 🧠 Managing your time and energy well.
- 🧠 Spending time with affirming, fun people.

Strategies for dealing effectively with bipolar disorder include an effective treatment plan that you follow; an attitude focused on hope, responsibility, and recovery; an effective support system; healthy eating, sleeping, and activity habits; recognition of symptoms and trouble signs; a response plan for crises. You can incorporate these strategies into your life in your own way and at your own pace.

Everyone develops a different wellness plan, and the right one is the one that works for you.

"We've Been There. We Can Help."

