Seeking Help for Bipolar Disorder

by BECKY WICKS

Getting Help for Bipolar

John Donne once said that 'no man is an island', a statement that still rings true today.

However isolated you may feel during times of illness, it is important to reach out to those around you to ask for assistance.

Seeking help can be difficult at times when you have bipolar disorder, as you may feel that you do not need help, you are not ‘sick enough' for help, or that you do not deserve help.

You may feel shy about initially seeking help, or even ashamed, but medical professionals are trained to help people who are going through the exact situations you are, and your friends and family can also be an essential part of your tool kit in the recovery process.

If you do seek help from a medical professional, there is a chance that they will offer you the help of medication. This is not something to be afraid of – bipolar is a chemical imbalance within the brain and these medications are simply there to try to rebalance that.

Some types of medication used within bipolar treatment are mood stabilisers (such as Lamotrigine or Sodium Valproate), antipsychotics (such as Abilify or Risperidone), antidepressants (such as Zoloft or Citalopram), or sometimes you may be prescribed benzodiazepines (such as Klonopin or Restoril).

Medications can come with some unpleasant side effects, however most of these will fade within the first few weeks of use, and the positive impact of the medication on your quality of life will far outweigh the negative effects once the correct balance has been reached.

There are many ways in which you can seek help if you begin to feel unwell, or if you want continued support after an episode. Depending on the where you are located in the world, you may have access to the following options:

(This is not an exhaustive list, and is mostly based on UK care, so the person in this position in your country may have a different title.)

General Practitioner

A lot of people experiencing mental health distress first seek help through their GP, or family doctor. A GP is a good initial point of contact as they have most likely met you previously, will have a record of your medical history, and can serve as a gateway into other types of care. In the UK for example, a GP can make referrals onto more intensive services such as community mental health teams, psychiatrists, or more intensive specialist services.

Counsellor

Counsellors are very good at providing emotional support, especially post episode. They are trained to help you work through what has happened, and to help you come to terms with the disorder. They are a friendly yet professional ear to talk to, and can help you work through any issues you may be coming across.

Access to free counsellors will vary according to where you live and what health care your location offers, however nearly all locations should have certified and licensed counsellors that can be accessed through private methods. Counsellors are unable to prescribe or advise on medication.

Next page: four more sources of support for people with bipolar.

Psychologist

There are many different kinds of psychologists, and they offer a variety of types of care. Some common forms of care used in bipolar treatment and recovery are:

- **CBT (cognitive behavioural therapy) –** CBT is based on trying to change negative thought processes and patterns in order to help maintain a more stable mind-set.
- **Mindfulness –** The aim of mindfulness is partially to help the patient reconnect with themselves during times of panic (e.g. if social situations make someone panic then mindfulness techniques can be useful in calming them down).
- **Interpersonal therapy –** This is aimed at ensuring relationships are solid and a support network is firm. Psychologists are unable to prescribe or advise on medication.

Psychiatrist

A psychiatrist holds a medical licence and is therefore able to prescribe and advise on medication. They offer a more intensive form of care, and are often instrumental in the transition between hospital and care in the community. A psychiatrist is often consulted during the initial diagnosis period, and often will care for someone until they have reached long-term stability. Psychiatrists are also able to refer a patient onto psychologists or specialist teams etc.

Specialist Teams

In some areas there may be the possibility of reaching treatment under a specialist team. One example of such a team is an early intervention in psychosis service - sometimes referred to as EIIPS or EIP. This kind of team is trained in psychosis, and aimed at people usually between the ages of 14-35 who are experiencing their first episode of psychosis. They can offer a variety of types of care, from specialist psychiatrists to group therapy, and are often instrumental in recovery from a significant bipolar psychotic episode.

Crisis Lines

Some local medical services may offer the option of a crisis line for someone who is already under their care. This is usually a phone line operated outside of the usual opening hours of the team, and is manned by on duty professionals and people trained to handle emergency calls.

At times, more extreme episodes can require a stay in a psychiatric inpatient unit. This is not something to be apprehensive about, as hospital will provide a safe and secure environment for intensive care and observation. Stays are often fairly short, and the patient is discharged into community care, there is often a better idea of how to treat that individual patient.

Other Sources of Support

Outside of the medical world, there are other forms of help to aid in coping with bipolar disorder. Helplines (such

as the Samaritans in the UK) can be vital in offering advice during a difficult period, or even just a friendly ear to talk to if you are feeling isolated or lonely.

There are also websites that can offer support such as 7cupsoftea, which provides a free 24h online service where you can connect with someone to talk to immediately. Please note, whilst these are valuable services, they are not trained medical professionals and any immediate and intense crisis should be directed to the relevant service.

It is essential that you seek help before an episode hits crisis point, as this will prevent longer term and more intense damage from occurring. If you feel you are becoming very unwell again then please consult a medical professional immediately, or take yourself to the nearest hospital. If you are unable to get to a hospital alone, or feel that it is too dangerous, then please either call someone immediately, or call the ambulance using your local emergency number.