How Keeping a Journal Can Be Helpful for Bipolar Management

by KIKI WOODHAM

Journaling for Bipolar

I wake up, bleary-eyed and exhausted. Not enough sleep. Never enough sleep. I stumble down the hall to where two little girls are bouncing off the walls in their bedroom, fighting over who gets to put which dresses on their dolls. After the usual morning ritual of dressing, feeding and shuffling the kids off to school, I pull out a little notebook and write down the following:

"Morning. Breakfast: cinnamon roll, coffee. Medication. Sleep: 6 hours, 20 minutes. Why am I awake?"

I keep a journal about my bipolar life; not quite as regularly as I would like to, but often enough to be helpful. It doesn't need to be a lot. Just a few lines every day is all I need — what I ate, whether or not I remembered morning and evening medication, how much I slept, and a rough idea of how I felt.

Some of you might do the same; others might wonder why I'd write about myself as if I were participating in a lab experiment. The answer is as vague as it is simple: it helps.

Keeping a regular journal is an incredible tool. It allows me (and you, too) to track patterns in my moods and behavior that can lend amazingly clear perspective to the sometimes foggy haze that is bipolar disorder.

What a Journal Can Do for You

By tracking a few basic but important areas of my life, I can spot patterns in mood and behavior that let me know when a rough patch might be coming. That kind of foresight can sometimes actually help me to prevent the kind of extreme manic or depressive episodes I used to be powerless against, or at the very least, more quickly get the extra help I need to deal with them.

For example, if I notice that I've been sleeping more, binge-watching a lot of TV on Netflix, and my appetite has increased, I know I might be headed toward a depressive episode (I know a lot of people eat less when they're depressed and more when they're manic; I am the opposite).

I'm then able to change my behavior accordingly — spend a bit more time outdoors, stay active, avoid alcohol, and watch what I eat, all of which can really turn the tide when I'm beginning to feel depressed. My doctor and I have also set up a sort of first-response therapy plan for dealing with my depressive episodes before they get out of hand, since for me those are the most severe and most frequent. Recognizing them early on can save me months of misery and extra medication.

On the other hand, if I've been sleeping less, eating less, and feeling optimistic about the whole world and all the wonderful things in it, I might just be careening into mania. When that happens, I can slow myself down by doing things like working less, participating in certain hobbies that keep me sitting quietly for a while (knitting, anyone?), spending some quality time with my TV, and avoiding the foods and drinks that tend to wind me up.

Next page: how to get started.

But Why Journal?

Surely I can recognize these things on my own, without having to write them down. Yes, I probably could, if I sat down and did some soul-searching every day. Which I don't. And then, of course, I'd have to remember how I felt for the last week. Which I don't.

The truth is that while it would be lovely to be able to keep all that information in my head, I just can't, and I don't often sit down and think about how I'm really, truly feeling deep down inside. So journaling gives me (and you) and chance to dig deep for just a couple of minutes a day, and then write it down (or record it digitally) so you don't have to try to remember.

Then, when you need to know how you're really feeling, and how you've been feeling for the last two weeks, all you have to do is open a notebook or an app.

How to Do It

The 'how' is really up to you — your tastes, your lifestyle, your preferences. A mood journal can be something like mine — a little notebook with a few lines on basic functions every day. But it can really be anything else that works for you.

Some people just keep a sheet of paper with a number written on it each day for their mood — a scale of 1-10, with 5 being stable, 1 being completely depressed, and 10 being off-the-walls manic. Others go a different direction, with longer entries logged each day either on paper or in an app. Find a method that works for you and that you like doing.

If you want to go digital and stick with the very simple route, there's an app called Mr. Mood (iOS) which allows you to slide your finger over your phone or tablet screen each day to rate your mood. You can optionally add a very short note to the day, and it keeps track of a month at a time.

If you're looking for something more thorough, Optimism is a great choice. It's available for Mac, PC, iOS, Android, and browser. Every field is fully customizable, so you can choose exactly what you track and how you track it, and you can even email long term charts to your doctor.

At the end of the day, as with most things in life, there is no one 'right' way to keep a mood journal. The most important thing is just to do it, and make sure you choose a method that's comfortable for you. The potential benefits are huge, and all it costs is a little of your time.