Regaining Control of Your Life With Exercise

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Bipolar and Exercise for Recovery

Bipolar is an umbrella term that covers many variants of a disorder. The main symptoms are mood episodes ranging from hypomania/mania (which includes symptoms such as racing thoughts, impulsive behavior and insomnia) to depression (which includes symptoms such as feelings of hopelessness, a low mood and suicidal ideation). Some types of bipolar, such as type I, can include bipolar psychosis symptoms.

If you are struggling with the symptoms of bipolar disorder, a healthy lifestyle is one way you can manage your feelings and regain control of your life. Following a balanced diet and avoiding excessive amounts of caffeine are two ways to do this, but regular exercise may also help some of the symptoms associated with bipolar episodes, especially those connected to the depressive type.

However, it is important to treat each episode on a unique basis, and to take things slowly. If you are in doubt about any aspect of exercise, or the way you are feeling, reach out and talk to someone as soon as you are able to.

Detailed below are some of the ways exercise might help you alleviate the symptoms of a depressive episode, and some general useful information:

Join an Exercise Class

If you experience depressive symptoms, you may withdraw socially and become increasingly isolated. Joining an exercise class may seem daunting at first, but will help get you out of the house, into new surroundings, and will expose you to positive social situations. If this feels as though it would be too much to cope with, consider taking a gentle walk with a friend a couple of times a week. Not only would that help improve your exercise regime, it would also build on previous social relationships.

Benefiting From Endorphins

It is well documented that exercise releases endorphins, so during times of depression exercise could be extremely helpful in helping you get back to a level setting. Exercise, however, is not a sole therapy, and it may be that you need medication alongside it in order to rectify the chemical imbalances you are experiencing.

Taking It Slow

Remember you do not have to start with intensive exercise — try taking it slowly and increasing your sessions until you hit 30 minutes roughly three times per week. If you are unable to do this, do not let it set you back, but rather do the best that you can, and achieve that which is within your reach.

Choose Activities You Enjoy

Picking a type of exercise you enjoy is also important. If exercise feels like a chore it runs the risk of feeding into a depressive episode; if you skip a session you may suffer a blow to your self-esteem. Choose something you like and make a positive choice, that way you have something to look forward to every few days. Doing something you enjoy also helps you build on a skill for the future, as you grow and improve through classes or self-study.

Next page: how to take control of your own recovery

Clearing Your Head

Exercise can provide a distraction from worries and give you a chance to focus on yourself. Getting a clear head can be valuable in recovery and can help give you a new perspective on life around you.

Taking Control of Your Own Recovery

Starting exercise can help you increase a sense of control over your recovery, as this is something you can do yourself, and continue to work through. Many people feel out of control during a bipolar episode and feel as though medical professionals are the only ones who are controlling them, or who are able to control them. An exercise regime is something you can manage yourself.

Please note that manic episodes require careful handling with regards to exercise, as there is the potential for symptoms to worsen as more brain chemicals — such as endorphins — are released, thus elevating mood.

While it is a good opportunity to burn off the extra energy you may have, there is a risk of becoming obsessed, over indulging or triggering other dangerous behaviors.

Manic episodes often entail a lack of sleep, and it may be that regular exercise helps you to re-establish a solid sleep pattern and avoid a full-blown relapse. However, there is a chance that exercise will wake up your body, and thus sleep may evade you even further.

If you are experiencing manic symptoms, please consult your physician before beginning a regular exercise routine in order to avoid any potential risks.

According to studies, bipolar disorder can be associated with an increased risk of cardiovascular disease, obesity and diabetes, and exercise is one way of combating this risk. Staying healthy is important for everyone, and it is even more important if you are at risk of certain medical conditions.

Exercise can also help to challenge the weight gain that may occur with certain types of medication. Weight gain can cause low self-esteem, and may trigger or worsen a depressive episode, so exercising and maintaining your weight is a valuable tool in staying healthy.

Remember that building a routine would take anyone some time, and you cannot expect miracles overnight. Do not be too hard on yourself, and don’t let a slow start have an impact on your self-esteem.

Consider keeping an exercise diary so you are able to go back through and remind yourself of times you achieved positive results, so you are aware that you can achieve this again. Keeping an overall mood tracker could also provide you with positive results, and exercise times could be part of what is noted within your diary.

It is vitally important that you consult a doctor before starting any kind of exercise regime, as there may be factors associated with your medication or your overall health that will have an impact on your choices. Do not let that deter you from considering an exercise regime, as chances are you will have positive results — especially if you have a greater tendency of depressive episodes.