Recognizing the Symptoms of Bipolar Disorder and Seasonality

by SHARON DAVIS

Understanding Seasonal Bipolar

There is growing evidence to suggest bipolar moods correspond with seasons. Most commonly, elevated moods (hypomania or full-blown mania) are more common in the spring and summer seasons, and depression, in all levels of severity, is more common in the fall and winter months.

Although seasonal bipolar disorder has been experienced by many, there is no definitive evidence as to why mania occurs more often in the spring and summer. There is much more evidence for the increased risk of depression in fall and winter months; these increases in depression likely correspond to the emergence of seasonal affect disorder (SAD), a well-documented form of depression, once downplayed as just the *winter blues*.

The symptoms of SAD generally arrive in mid-fall as shortened days and falling temperatures mean less time outside and less exposure to sunlight.

These seasonal changes are often coupled with the start of the academic year, which for parents, teachers and students alike means added responsibility following a leisurely summer break. On top of this, the obligations associated with the fall and winter holidays mean many people are left overburdened with diminishing emotional reserves.

Treatment for SAD

If you think you are experiencing SAD, see your doctor and discuss possible changes in your medications. Your doctor may also suggest light therapy, which involves purchasing a light box that mimics outdoor light.

There is evidence to suggest a daily exposure to this type of light can elevate your mood due to chemical changes in your brain chemistry. You can purchase a light box over-the-counter. Although your doctor may recommend a special brand of light box, it will likely not be covered by insurance.

Clash of Seasons

But for many of us with bipolar it doesn’t end there. Thankfully many of us have access to good doctors, good medicine and good advice.

However, seasonal depression represents a literal fall from the steep cliff of mania — at best hypomania, at worst full-blown mania. This dramatic mood swing can be incredibly dangerous. It is important for us to be honest with ourselves and acknowledge this internal conflict that can plunge us into an even greater depression.

The Cycle

Mania and hypomania bring about different behaviors in each person. Some spend irrational amounts of money,

some are promiscuous, some are irritable, and the list goes on.

One thing most manic behaviors have in common is we often end up regretting them at some point. And so the end of the manic summer and the beginning of the depressive fall can be a time of reckoning — a time of having to face your mistakes.

I don't know about you, but for me it is like overindulging in food for months and one day stripping naked in front of a mirror. It isn't a pretty sight; in addition to the bulging fat, I am completely covered in shame.

My shoulders slump and I put a familiar track on an endless loop in my mind: an ode to my failure that warns me to never try again. If I have the courage to question the song, I am reminded to simply look in the mirror again and it becomes a vicious cycle.

Next page: breaking the cycle and accepting yourself

Breaking the Cycle

For me, the key to breaking this cycle starts with radical acceptance. I can do all the right things, but it doesn't mean much until I accept myself. I must accept my disease and the many mistakes I have made.

If I can just smile because I am alive and here to enjoy another day, I am on the right track. There is a huge difference in being shamed into change and changing because you already love yourself and want the best for you. Radical acceptance is the first step.

Clearing Your "House"

This step can be done with the help of a friend, but keep in mind you must own this process.

The basic tenets to clearing the "internal" house of your mind are essentially the same as clearing your physical house: you must first remove the junk in your life so there is more time and energy to devote to the important things. What you choose to throw out is about individual choice.

Take inventory of your inner dialogue and cleanse your negative emotions and feelings through ridding yourself of negative talk. This is also an opportunity to clear yourself of bad habits that sap up your energy, like watching television for hours or overindulging in junk food.

New Décor

Once the junk has been removed, you will notice there is so much extra space in your life. At this point it is important to choose the things you actually want in your life.

If you gave up lying on the couch you will still need a form of recreation. Try to choose one that is both enjoyable and keeps you active. You need not run or walk for miles, but getting up and doing something you enjoy will do a wealth of good.

Fill your world with things you enjoy and that are good for you. Enjoy hearing pleasant thoughts about yourself and your life — and be patient.

It can take years to really accept yourself and your illness. I have been at it for over a decade and am still working on ways to refine breaking the cycle and fill my life with new, more positive décor.

When fall hits and quickly turns into a long winter, it's important to remember these things and keep yourself in check. Don't let the change of seasons dictate your life — take control and put your health first.