How to Manage School Life With Bipolar Disorder

by BECKY WICKS

Going to School With Bipolar

Bipolar disorder is a mental illness that entails the person diagnosed having moods that vary between depression and mania, with the chance for mixed episodes. Bipolar also has the potential for psychosis in some types of the disorder, especially type 1 bipolar.

Having bipolar causes stress for everyone diagnosed, however this stress is likely to be exacerbated if you are in some form of education. High school and college can be difficult at the best of times, but adding in mental illness can bring with it unexpected complications.

For example, you may be affected in the following ways:

- You may have upcoming exams or assignment deadlines that could trigger a mood episode or cause unwanted signs of bipolar.
- You may feel under a lot of pressure from peers and teachers to perform at a certain level or behave a certain way that may lead to extra stress.
- You may be exposed to alcohol and street drugs that heighten the risk of having another episode or making an episode worse.
- You may be keeping your illness a secret and the thought of people finding out may be causing you a great deal of stress.
- You may find balancing your life very difficult, which could be causing a negative impact on your life.

All these factors combined will make for a very stressful situation, and you may find yourself starting to become unwell again. It is important to be prepared for these kinds of situations, and to have plans in place for them.

Ways to Help Yourself

Reach Out

Talk to your tutors and teachers — they are there to help. They may seem unapproachable, but it is likely they will have had training on how to help someone going through a difficult time and they may be able to offer advice or insight.

The more they know, the more flexible they can be in their approach to your work. For example, you may be able to get an extension on an upcoming deadline, or it may explain why a piece of work was not quite your usual standard.

Avoiding Triggers

Avoid situations where you may be exposed to drink or drugs. This does not mean stop going out altogether and

become a hermit, but rather pick and choose where you go carefully; with bipolar there can be impulsive behavior so it is important to look after yourself.

Taking Time Off

Consider taking a time out. Taking a year, or even more, off from education is nothing to be ashamed of; sometimes you need time to reflect back and start planning for the future.

Taking time off can help you to strengthen your recovery and can give you more time to learn better coping methods for periods of illness.

Next page: advice on staying healthy while in college

Ways to Help Yourself

Identify Warning Signs

Being able to identify when a period of unwell behavior might be setting in is a vital skill to learn, and if you can pass this knowledge onto those around you then this is an even better idea.

Try and log triggers of what set off this behavior, or how you were feeling before the symptoms set in, to locate patterns and stop episodes before they set in.

Don’t Be Afraid to Talk

Talk to those around you. While you may be scared of what people may say or think, the more people are educated about mental health, the greater the understanding they will have. Your friends will be able to support you and help you during your times of need, and can provide perspectives on how you feel.

Staying Healthy in College

Following a healthy lifestyle is also important in helping to maintain good mental health. While you are away at college or university it can be hard to do so, but if you try these tips you can help look after yourself:

- **Try and maintain a healthy diet.** Avoid too much fat and sugar as the highs and the crashes from too much junk food can hinder your mental health.
- **Take part in gentle exercise.** A lot of educational facilities have gyms and exercise classes which will not only help to boost your serotonin levels, but will also help you to bond with others and make new social connections.
- **Try and manage stress.** While stress is an unavoidable part of life, learning techniques to manage it can be extremely beneficial. For example, in highly stressful situations you may find breathing techniques to calm yourself down work well, or taking regular breaks from work in order to assess your progress.
- **Try yoga or meditation, which are designed to help everyone relax.** You may also benefit from learning mindfulness, which teaches you to be more in contact with the way you are feeling and can help you process thoughts. Equally, just as with exercise classes, yoga classes could also result in social connections and strong bonds of friendship.

Sometimes in times of crisis it is unavoidable to stay out of an inpatient setting, and a stay in hospital may be needed. If you are in school this may be disruptive to your schedule and may cause a great deal of upset.

It is important to give yourself time to process what has happened, and to work through how you are feeling. Don’t be too hard on yourself on your discharge, and try to work towards a more stable mental health level before launching back into the full swing of education.

Work with the medical team you are assigned, and put everything you have into recovery. Try not to work against professionals — remember they are only there to help you.

Most importantly, in times of severe crisis please ensure you visit the emergency room as soon as possible, or contact the relevant medical professionals quickly. If your area has an emergency or crisis line then make use of it, all these services are there to help you in your recovery.