Bipolar Resolutions to Start the Year Strong

by FLISS BAKER

Working Towards Wellness With New Year's Resolutions

On New Year’s Day we aspire to change our lives for the better, giving up bad habits and taking up better ones. As we clink our glasses at midnight we are filled with hope and motivation.

Last year I aimed to give up smoking and I convinced myself I could ditch the unhealthy habit I had tolerated for 15 years. I really believed I could undo the puffing overnight.

After battling an eating disorder for many years and feeling scared of the gym, I had also decided it would be good to find a local exercise class. I thought my focus would last.

I fell into the New Year’s trap last year and put my heart and soul into making changes. It backfired and I started smoking again in February, when I became depressed. This prevented me from searching for an exercise class because I had no motivation, and as a result I lost my focus — which turned into disappointment, failure, pain and anguish.

I got swept away with celebrations and listening to others and their plans. I forgot I had an unpredictable, and at times unstable, illness that without careful management and a realistic perspective, could come back to haunt me.

So What Have I Learned?

We need to reset our expectations to what we can easily cope with. Changing attitudes and behavior takes time and we need understanding and support without pressure.

“Little by little” is my motto, with lots of self-compassion. If we don’t manage to do something we need to remind ourselves that we are only human and we need to be kind to ourselves.

I have put together a list of ideas of how we can achieve a true sense of wellbeing. There is one rule: pick only one idea for your New Year’s resolution as we have a better chance of incorporating this as part of our daily lives. Once we move forwards with achieving a small, realistic goal, doors will open that enable us to achieve in other areas.

Sleep

It's all about establishing a routine. Don't expect an overnight change, but as you persevere your body will accept it.

- Set a time to go to bed.
- Put down any electronic equipment two hours before sleep.
- Run a hot bath half an hour before bed.

- Make yourself a hot milky drink just before bed.
- Make sure your bedroom is dark and cool.
- Set your alarm for a reasonable hour aiming to get around eight hours of sleep.
- As you relax, be patient and let all your worries float away.

Stay calm! This routine over time will bring huge benefits.

Next page: working on nutrition, exercise and relationships this year.

Relaxation

Relaxation is completely underrated and is scientifically proven to reduce stress in the body. It takes practice but there are many ways to learn and it is about finding what works for you.

- Lie down on your back or on your side.
- One option is to think of an image that calms you — a sunset or a place that makes you happy.
- My personal favorite is telling each part of my body to relax, focusing on each limb and wait until I feel a tingling sensation.

Food and Nutrition

A balanced view of food is about eating all food groups in moderation. We need carbohydrates, fats and protein and our choices should reflect color. Lots of vegetables, fruit and nutritious snacks.

Food is not just about enjoyment, it is fueling our bodies so our minds can work to their maximum capability. Ideally we need to be eating three meals a day with two snacks, drinking lots of water and avoiding lots of caffeine.

It is incredibly important to focus on what we put inside our bodies because it is instrumental to managing bipolar disorder.

Exercise

I could preach about gym classes, yoga, Pilates, running, or any other exercise but in all honesty they feel exhausting to think about.

Exercising is about moving your body according to your capability. If you don't feel like you have the energy for vigorous exercise, go for a walk — but choose somewhere with nice scenery or somewhere you like so it is motivating and brings enjoyment.

If you feel up to it, join a class and don't beat yourself up over what you can and can’t do. Stay at the back if you like and remember why you are there. It is about creating endorphins, lifting your mood and doing it for yourself, nobody else.

Connecting With People

We all know how introverted we can become when our illness hits. Connecting with others enables us to manage our illness in the better times which can prevent unstable episodes.

- Try to spend less time alone.
- It is OK to communicate through social networks, but connecting with people face to face is so important.
- Phone a friend you haven't spoken to in a long time.

- Arrange a visit with someone you love to hang around with.
- Organize a weekly coffee morning with friends or family.
- Join an activity group with local services, such as creative writing or drama.

Doing Things for Enjoyment

What do you love to do? It is not selfish to think about yourself and what motivates you.

- Reading a few pages or your favorite book.
- Watching your favorite films.
- Shopping.

Next page: helping yourself and helping others.

Doing Things for Enjoyment

- Walking or running.
- Making things, such as cards for others, embroidery or knitting.
- Writing poetry or stories.

Learning to Be More Self-Compassionate

It is renowned for people with bipolar to beat ourselves up over things we have done in the past and the way we behave, but it’s bad for our health.

We need to learn to accept ourselves in whatever state we are in. Pain and sadness is part of life and if we learn to face and process it we can move forwards.

The mantra I use when I feel overwhelmed is, “I am human, it's OK to feel this way, and others experience pain and sadness too. I can soothe myself through giving myself compassion and this moment will eventually pass.” Think of something similar to say to yourself.

Helping Others

It is so rewarding to help others!

- Share your personal journey through social media and enjoy the support you receive.
- Inspire others with poetry and writing.
- Visit an elderly relative for a cup of tea.
- Babysit for a friend and relish the company of the innocent.
- Bake a cake for someone.
- Listen to a friend who is going through something.

Increasing Independence

If you have been heavily reliant on someone, that's OK, but how about trying to complete a small task independently on a daily basis. This might be making breakfast, making a cup of tea, or walking to the post office to mail a letter. Start small and the feeling of empowerment will motivate you further.

Doing Something New

Doing something new is always scary. I am heavily reliant on my daily routine and feel anxious when I think of trying something new.

You don't need to be alone. Ask a friend or family member to join you on an activity you want to do, such as an exercise class or social event.

Be Inspired

Pick one idea from the list and put into action the part that suits you. Don't feel overwhelmed.

The New Year is about what you need and what will help you progress in managing your illness and creating a better sense of wellbeing. Always remember to start small. We have a habit of wanting to take on the world and being aware of this is the first step to remembering that little by little is the best strategy.