How Understanding Your Condition Improves Your Life

by SHARON DAVIS

Why Bipolar Education Is So Important

Growing up in the Midwest, tornadoes often threatened our country home. As the dark clouds formed, dark thoughts formed in my mind. As they whirled in my mind I could see that tiny house from *The Wizard of Oz* spinning in midair. Would the same thing happen to our house?

A few hours later the storm would pass, but another type of storm often blew through our house. With very little notice, my mother seemingly morphed into another person.

Gone was the low-key, loving mom I knew. She was replaced with a hostile woman who was mad as hell.

She spewed curses everywhere — to my dad, to my teachers, the pastor of our church — to everyone except for her children. We were spared from the vicious words. But her hostility went beyond words.

Her body coursed with tension as if her blood and organs were under pressure and ready to explode. During these times the normal bumps and bruises of life turned into major ordeals, and the only way my mother dealt with them was to get into someone's face and yell.

This would go on for days, sometimes weeks. And then, through intricate acts of coercion, my father would get her admitted to the state hospital an hour away. She would come back home three weeks later, vowing that this was the last time.

As hard as she tried, she'd be back in the hospital within a year. This tragic cycle of events defined my 1970s childhood.

The Importance of Understanding Bipolar Disorder

My mother's episodes were random, hurtful and largely the result of being uninformed about living with bipolar. She did not understand her illness and the ingredients that led to the perfect storm of mania.

She was unaware of her triggers and warning signs of mania. She just went about her days, choosing the path of least resistance, but also the path to a manic episode.

Thankfully, mental health has progressed by leaps and bounds in the last 40 years. In the new millennium there are dozens of excellent resources to become aware of creating a lifestyle that helps you manage your condition.

"It is important that both you and your loved ones join you on this journey of understanding your illness.

There several different types of resources to use on your journey. They include:

- Personal resources
- Medical resources
- Lifestyle resources
- Support groups/community

Personal Resources

Wherever you are on the bipolar journey, make a pact to be your own best friend and advocate. While you may not always be capable of fulfilling these roles, you can always delegate them.

Build a support team to help you. For me, this was the hardest part because I wasn't comfortable asking for help.

Let this person(s) walk with you, learn with you and live with you. As you trust this person, let them become a mirror to give you a reflection of your constantly changing life.

In addition to having a support team, I found it extremely helpful to keep a journal. It wasn't a perfect journal and I didn't write an entry every day, but reading over the journal reminds me how far I've come.

It was also helpful to record my moods each day or week. It allowed me to see patterns in my mood and better understand my triggers.

Medical Resources

Understanding your illness means getting a grasp of the clinical information. The good thing is that you do not need a medical encyclopedia — there are several good medical websites just a few key strokes away.

There are also a variety of books and DVDs that provide valuable content. As you research your condition, look before you leap. Make sure you understand the individual or agency that is providing the content.

For example, sometimes a pharmaceutical company may provide information about bipolar disorder, with a hidden agenda of promoting their drugs. Look for information that is less biased — perhaps from a government agency or top research institution.

As you learn about the medical aspects of bipolar disorder, involve your psychiatrist and don't be afraid to ask questions. This can only enhance your treatment experience.

Lifestyle Resources

Over the years I have discovered that as much as I need medication, my lifestyle choices are a critical part of my recovery.

There are several popular books for bipolar patients and family members touted as "survival guides" that provide practical advice and tips for managing your illness. These books are reasonably priced and can be an important investment in your recovery.

There are also hundreds of online resources. Again, carefully inspect the content and the person or agency behind it. Content could be written by a mental health professional, a staff writer, or a person with bipolar disorder.

Never be afraid to question — in fact, get used to questioning. Be wary of any website that contains guaranteed or instant results. Most importantly, you are more than just a researcher; as you learn, you need to implement what you are learning.

It is easy to go into information overload. Stay focused on taking your recovery one step at a time.

Support Groups/Community

Being part of bipolar support group or community can be an integral part of your recovery. In this environment you are no longer alone trying to figure it out — you now have a collective knowledge that is far greater than your own.

You are usually in a safe place where you do not need to hide your illness. Some of my best understanding of my illness has come from being in a community.

Plus the social support can be incredibly affirming. Like always, don’t be afraid to question — it can only lead to a deeper understanding.

We live in a time where there are unlimited opportunities to learn about our illness. As you venture into these opportunities, don’t be afraid to ask questions.

If a particular opportunity doesn’t fit where you are at, don’t be afraid to let it go. Use your resources — medical, lifestyle, support and personal and gradually apply them to your personalized disease management. And don’t forget to take your supporters on your path to learning how to manage your disease.