Bipolar Support: Why You Need Your Friends and Family

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Building a Bipolar Support Team

Make no mistake about it: bipolar disorder is an insidious condition that will negatively impact your mental, physical and spiritual health. When fighting such an opposing adversary, you need every tool available to you to be in working order and operating at high efficiency. You need medication prescribers and therapists, and perhaps more than anything else, you need your personal support team.

Your personal support team will differ from professional supports in two major ways:

- Directly or indirectly, you do not pay them.
- They are not encouraged or obligated to assist you due to any professional affiliations.

Personal supports are the ones interested in helping you because they want to, not because they have to. That is the good part.

The bad part is this group will be comprised of people that mean well, but lack the education or experience in truly assisting someone with a serious mental health condition like bipolar disorder.

With this being the case, many people in your situation may feel frustrated, disappointed or annoyed by the personal support team. This view is a mistake, though, as it will only weaken the bonds that hold the team together.

After enough time of poor results, the team will dissolve and you will be left attacking bipolar with less support. Less support equals more symptoms.

There is another option, though. Instead of passively allowing your support team to make decisions about your treatment, health and wellbeing, train them to become an army of support. They can become a team adept at knowing your issues and the best strategies to assist. Here's how:

Symptom Identification

If you are having a boot camp for your personal support team, the first step is identifying your symptoms. This area will require high levels of education from trusted sources with expertise in bipolar disorder, as well as a period of reflection on your own symptom history.

Since bipolar disorder includes aspects of depression and mania/hypomania, you and your team will have to be knowledgeable about many details. Discuss these questions:

- What are the early signs of depression?
- What are the early signs of mania or hypomania?

- When do symptoms of depression become dangerous?
- When do symptoms of mania or hypomania become dangerous?
- How do you know when symptoms are beginning to alleviate?

By discussing and addressing these questions while symptoms are low, you and your team become better prepared to identify symptoms in the future.

Symptom Treatment

Unfortunately, identifying the symptoms is not enough — you must treat the symptoms. When periods of depression or mania are high, you may be less interested in following through with appropriate treatment recommendations.

A skilled personal support team can:

- **Encourage medication compliance.** Employ your support team to serve as reminders to get the right doses of the right medications at the right times during manic or depressive episodes.
- **Encourage therapy compliance.** The personal support team will do well to ensure your scheduled contact with the professional support team.
- **Promote self-care.** Train your support team to engage you in a healthier lifestyle by eating meals together, going for walks together, and establishing good sleep habits.
- **Practice coping skills.** Motivation to practice and perform these skills might be low when symptoms are high, but using your team can promote increased success in completing helpful skills.
- **Aid decision making.** While symptoms are experiencing a flare, your judgment will be poor. By using your personal support team to brainstorm options for each decision, you can build a consensus based in rational, objective thought.

Symptom Distraction

Of course, not all of your time can be spent working on symptom improvement. All work and no play will lead to a sense of frustration and burnout from you and your team.

This final step involves adding some pleasure to your life through symptom distraction. Reducing all of the unwanted symptoms from your life will be impossible, but if you can add some positives, you might be more comfortable with the results.

Use distraction in moderation as it can lead to avoidance in the long-term.

Find Enjoyment

You will not be able to think of fun activities while you are depressed. While you are manic, all of the activities you are interested in could lead to negative or dangerous results.

When symptoms are low, train your team with a list of healthy and fun activities. Include many of your old favorites as well as some others you have wanted to try in an effort to expand your range.

Items on your list can be simple like listening to music and watching a favorite movie, to complex like going skydiving or on an extended road trip.

Change Environment

A funny situation develops when you stare at the same four walls all day — symptoms get worse. It might not be something you can realize or even perceive at this point, but it is happening.

Changing your environment gives you a chance to change your thought and behavior patterns that will be largely influenced by bipolar disorder at this point. You do not have to embark on a transcontinental journey to change your environment. A quick trip to the store or a walk around the block will have a positive effect on your symptoms.

Train your support team to apply the right amount of pressure to boost your motivation.

Bipolar is too challenging to tackle alone, and it is too persistent to confront without a skilled team. By turning your supports into a personal support team, you will build an army strong and prepared enough to stop bipolar in its tracks.