Living With a Partner, Friend, or Loved One With Bipolar

by SHARON DAVIS

Tips for Living With Someone With Bipolar

Fifteen years ago I lived with my mother, who has bipolar. Having spent a lifetime orchestrating my life around her highs and lows, I knew I faced a challenge.

But I also knew what expect. I knew I had to watch out for sleepless nights that could provide fertile ground for a manic episode, and I knew to watch out when she got too quiet and would spend her days in bed.

I was lucky. Millions of people live with someone who has bipolar and they do not know what to expect and will have to learn as they go along. This article is designed to help you by providing ideas of how to deal with someone who has bipolar.

Whether you are newly married, living with your partner or just moved in with a friend, I hope this advice helps you build a good foundation.

Wake up the Elephant in the Room

That's right, don't tiptoe around your roommate's illness — start a conversation. Take time to sit down and have a dialogue about the disease.

It can be difficult learning how to communicate with a bipolar person, so invite them to share openly about their past experiences and how their disease usually manifests. You may also want to ask about the following:

- **Triggers** – circumstances, events, situations that trigger the illness.
- **Symptoms** – what are the signs that a manic or depressive episode could be lurking in the darkness?
- **Medical history** – what types of medicines have worked in the past and which ones should be avoided? Keep in mind that at some point you may have to act as an advocate on the other person's behalf. You need to be informed.
- **Weaknesses** – does your roommate spend money when manic or get suicidal when depressed? You need to know these weaknesses and come up with intervention strategies before they happen.

Keep in mind that this conversation is not a one-time thing, so continue to keep an open dialogue. This will help your roommate feel supported and allow you to address issues before they become crises.

Help Them Create or Maintain a Support System

It takes a village to support someone with bipolar — you cannot do it alone. Encourage your roommate to stay connected to friends and family and encourage them to reach out and meet new people.

Don't Overstep Your Boundaries

Sometimes you may want to take over and make decisions for your roommate, but be careful; at times you may have to be an advocate and talk to medical personnel. But many other times you will need to take a step back and let your roommate speak for themself.

Don’t Forget to Have Fun!

Although this is a serious illness, it is important to have a balanced life. Whether it be a movie, getting together with friends or making a meal together, take time to have fun.

Take Time for Yourself

Create your own rituals that you enjoy. Do you enjoy an early morning walk? Do it!

Or maybe it’s a yoga class or an art class or meditation. Whatever it is, take the time to recharge your batteries.

Set Boundaries

Be clear about your expectations of your roommate and what you will and will not do for them. Bipolar disorder can often spawn risky behaviors such as unprotected sex, gambling, chemical addictions and excessive spending.

Setting boundaries is not easy, depending on the type of relationship you have. But it is important to not get into enabling behaviors that serve neither your or your roommate’s interests.

Don’t Take It Personally

When your roommate is in an episode they can often say and do things that are hurtful or insensitive. Many times you will become the villain, despite all of the love and care that you have poured into this relationship.

Trying to be rational and proving that you are right rarely works. However, focusing on your roommate’s welfare does. You may need to enlist other people from the support network to help you.

Remember It’s a Two-Way Street

You will probably invest a lot of time and energy in this relationship and it is important that you expect the same of your roommate. Even though they will have days when they can only give a limited amount or nothing at all, it is still important for them to see themselves as a giver and not just one who receives.

Be Supportive of New Lifestyle Choices

Is your roommate cutting out sugar or working on getting in bed before 11 p.m.? Then be supportive and don’t stock the fridge with items that will sabotage the eating plan or encourage them to stay up late. Help encourage the habits and routines that will make their disease more manageable.

Remember You Are Not Responsible

It is not your job to make your roommate feel, think or do anything. If something goes right, don’t hoard the credit, and if it goes wrong don’t load up on blame. You are here to help someone on a journey.

No doubt you will constantly be learning new things. Just don’t forget that there is only so much that you can do!