Staying Sober Through a Manic Episode

by FLISS BAKER

Coping Skills for Maintaining Sobriety Throughout a Manic Episode

Can you ever fully control yourself amidst the throws of all-consuming mania? That's the million-dollar question. We can only but try.

I am often asked whether nine years of bipolar experience means each episode gets easier. I have a staple answer for that.

Imagine you lost someone close to you and you had to get through the awful process of bereavement — then imagine you lost someone else. Would the process of grieving be any easier the second time? Of course not.

Experience Can Help

There is an argument, however, that experience of bipolar means you have ventured into many places — some euphoric and some monstrous — and you are therefore able to call upon these thoughts once you start entering a similar situation once again.

If your bipolar has taken you down a destructive path before, you may be able to interject and think, “Hold on, I can take a different path this time.”

In the lead up to mania I have spotted the elevated mood, agitation and irritability and recognized that, from past experience, picking up a drink is only going to make a situation much, much worse.

I always remind myself of the acute ward I spent months in and the pain and anguish I witnessed. I think of the difficult nurses, nightmare scenarios and loss of hope. That motivates me to make better decisions with regards to my health because I never want to go back.

So What Can We Learn?

Apart from learning from our previous experiences and making better decisions, what else can we do?

We can have a toolbox of ideas, which I'll discuss throughout this article, to use as and when we need them. We can write them down and stick them up on our walls and check them every day.

We may struggle to control ourselves at times, but we can sure as hell try and limit the damage of what our illness does to us when we want to drink.

Avoiding Temptation

When I am in a manic episode, alcohol is used to take the edge off my horrible agitation and to push myself into

different mindsets. I gamble to lose my head or just become someone else for a while. I don't think past the first sip, and as long as I have drink, I just keep going until it's gone.

I have a strategy to help with this. When I start to feel unwell I limit myself to going out and if I do, I drive.

Feeling high and drinking with friends is a false sense of security. My friends can drink until they fall over, pick themselves up again and fight through a hangover; whereas I am likely to keep going, end up going home with some guy or get complete memory blanks and behave deplorably.

A couple of years ago I got so drunk at a party I mumbled, cried and shouted at my friends and had to be taken home. The drink, my unstable mood and my medication pushed me over the edge.

The shame next day was excruciating and I quit drinking for six months due to anxiety and embarrassment. As a result, what stops me going out to drink when I'm feeling unwell is the reminder of the impact on other people and what that debilitating shame feels like.

I also used to drink at home, as I could get in whatever state I wanted and no one apart from my family was around to judge me. I bought cans of strong cider and drank one after the other, but now I make sure I don't buy drink for the house.

Think of ways you can make things harder for yourself so when you think of picking up a drink, you have space to think about it rather than having it within easy reach. There is a pub across the road from me, but I talk through my intentions with a family member and try and find something else to occupy myself with.

Next page: Keeping busy, and other tips for maintaining sobriety.

Keeping Busy

This should not be a problem in the throes of mania. I don't know about you, but I can flit from activity to activity throughout the day and night.

I make jewelry, paint my nails, go shopping, go out with friends, listen to music, write poetry, the list goes on. Alcohol doesn't have to be the first option.

It is worth writing a list of your favorite activities you do when you're manic (providing they don't speed up the mania or risk your safety, like exercising for hours on end or driving a car too fast).

Refer to this list when you feel you are going to drink and find a better option. If you've done one thing on the list and you still want to drink, do the second and then the third. Believe me, your brain will start to forget the impulse and you'll be able to rationalize your decisions more.

Talk to Others

Don't be afraid to talk through your thoughts and feelings. I have learned that it's best to do this with people you trust and not strangers.

Those who understand you and your illness will most likely listen, not judge you, and give you good advice. They might be able to rationalize the situation for you and give you the logical solutions your mania doesn't allow.

It's not always easy for us to listen while manic, however, a trusted person should have patience and the conversation might be enough to divert your attention from drinking.

Do Something to Help Others

One thing that massively helps me is helping other people. When we are seriously unwell we obviously have to focus on ourselves, but if we are able, doing something for someone else can be of huge value.

If you feel manic and know you are at risk of a drinking rampage, you could make plans to do something nice for another person. Why not keep busy by making a cake for someone you love or going to visit an elderly relative?

Going to see my little niece works for me because she grounds me and makes me want to be responsible. I also love shopping online for little gifts for people, but because I'm manic I have to make sure I have a budget — otherwise I'll go on a spending spree!

In the past I have sat and made photo albums for all of my friends and printing the photos and being creative kept me busy. It was a great way of using my manic energy to make other people smile.

Good Luck in Managing Your Sobriety

I hope the tips in this article make you review your own strategies and put a plan in place to prevent you picking up that drink and staying sober. If you feel your level of drinking is too serious to implement any of these ideas, there are professional services (such as AA) that will support and don't judge if you have mental health issues.

For everyone else, good luck! I can honestly say I feel much better at managing drinking and find there is a gap in the thought process of wanting a drink and actually drinking.

That's when we have the time and space to make better decisions. We know for a fact drinking will only destabilize us, and as I said earlier, no good can come of that.

Acute relapses only end up in hospital, which is a very challenging and nightmarish place at the best of times.