Bipolar Self-Care: Self-Help Methods for Depression and Hypomania

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I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder in January 2004 when a manic episode shook the foundations of my perfectly ordered life. I was hospitalized for a week with prescription medications and a lot of advice, much of which was supplied by fellow patients.

Some of the best advice was related to how to take care of myself. By that I mean, how to nurture myself, how to take care of those needs that are less visible and often hidden under a lot of emotional turmoil.

In sharing my self-care methods, I am going to divide them into two categories: methods used when I am depressed and methods used when I am hypomanic. I hope these techniques help you and that you discover additional self-care ways that work for you.

Methods for Depression

When I am depressed, I am usually living under a dark cloud of unworthiness. I don't feel worthy of a shower, a bath, clean teeth, or a polished appearance.

When you are depressed the key to self-care is to have compassion on yourself and acknowledge that you are worthy. You are worthy to feel comfortable, even if you feel yucky on the inside.

Here are some methods that work for me that you can try:

1. **Be patient with yourself.** When I am depressed everything slows down, including the ability to act and make decisions. Acknowledge this and allow yourself extra time to do the usual activities in your day. This simple act of compassion can reap incredible dividends.
2. **Meditate by beginning your day with positive thoughts.** During my depressive episodes, I often wake up in a flurry of negative thoughts and anxiety. I proclaim that things won't change or that it is my lot to be miserable. Then gradually, I began to replace these monstrous thoughts with soft, gentle truths. I congratulate myself for making it through yesterday. I write down a few things for which I am grateful.
3. **Write it out.** Dig deep and explore your feelings in complete honesty and without judgment. I like to use fun, colored pens. Many times instead of limiting myself to words, I draw pictures to express my emotions. Getting out my feelings is a good way to stay healthy.
4. **Every day, do one thing for yourself.** Honor yourself by doing something special for yourself. Take a nice shower, get your hair done (or do it yourself), buy the small, affordable item that will bring your joy or remind you of how special you are. Pick a few fresh flowers or anything that reminds you of your worth.
5. **Do something new.** Try a new healthcare product, take a new route to work, listen to new music or music that brings back happy memories. Visit and revisit the things that engender life and renewal.
6. **Just do it.** It is wise to negotiate your way out of a few obligations, but save your energy to do that one thing that is a game-changer. By game-changer, I mean the task that, once you conquer, will make you

feel on top of the world. For me, exercise was often a game-changer. Many times I didn't want to take a twenty-minute walk. But I forced myself, and during the first few minutes of the walk, I allowed myself to be mad and genuine to my emotions. The more I walked, the more my attitude improved and by the time I got home I was so, so, so happy that I pushed myself and achieved this seemingly minor feat.

Methods for Hypomania

When I am manic, the world seems to recklessly spin so fast that it could nearly fall off of its axis.

My mind is jammed packed with ideas and thoughts, and whenever I take a few minutes to process them, it seems that a dozen new thoughts have come to take their place.

I'm reckless, and I have to make a concerted effort to employ my self-care methods.

1. **Pause and take lots of deep breaths.** When you're overwhelmed take a deep breath, before you interrupt someone and blurt out whatever is on your mind, take a deep breath. Take a deep breath, hold it for five seconds and breathe it out. Does this slow things down or give you a new perspective? If not, try it again and continue this practice throughout the day.
2. **Ride the wave.** During hypomania, your thoughts and feelings are intense and never seem to stop. Fighting this powerful wave of energy can be incredibly exhausting and defeating. Instead of making it your goal to control the rush, try to ride it out. Let the thoughts come and go without judging them or analyzing them.
3. **Get plenty of exercises.** If you have the energy to burn…then burn it. Channel your energy into your favorite activities. The increased activity will help balance your emotions.
4. **Take a long bath.** I like to treat myself to a nice bubble bath. A friend of mine suggested that I use lukewarm water instead of hot water. I don't know why it works, but lowering the temperature of the bath water helps me relax.
5. **Get rest whenever you can.** If you feel like sleeping, do it. Even if you don't necessarily sleep, lay down with a good book or a movie.

This is just a sampling of some self-care strategies you can use. Practice makes perfect and as you start to practice some of these strategies your self-care will expand as you find new ways to cope with your illness!