Bipolar and Emotions: 5 Tips for Navigating The Ups and Downs

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Bipolar and Emotions: The Difference Between Mood Swings and Bipolar

We all know how unpredictable and random bipolar disorder can be. It is perhaps this unpredictability that makes life most difficult for people like us. One day, we can feel completely balanced and healthy. The next day – or sometimes the next minute – it can feel as though we cannot get out of bed or perform even the most minimal task. Unfortunately, we never know what is coming until it is upon us.

For us, the emotional instability and intensity of bipolar disorder can be quite unsettling. However, it is important to remember that there is a difference between mood swings and bipolar disorder. Everyone experiences mood swings – it is a natural part of the human experience.

Those of us who have bipolar may experience them more dramatically and more frequently, but we should not confuse mood swings with a bipolar episode.

The Ups and Downs of Living With Bipolar

Bipolar is a complex psychiatric disorder caused by a chemical imbalance in the brain. This chemical imbalance can cause us to experience severe, prolonged bouts of depression (lows) on one end of the spectrum and dangerous and overwhelming episodes of mania (highs) on the other. These extreme highs and lows are characteristic of bipolar disorder.

Between these two extremes, we may experience periods of emotional balance and normalcy. Usually, we still experience some level of emotional upheaval or mood swings on a daily basis. Fatigue, anxiety, hostility, mental obsessions and physical compulsions, sadness, irrational sparks of energy and the desire to isolate are common aspects of living with bipolar disorder. Learning to live with the emotional aspects of our illness is critical to leading a fulfilling and manageable life.

5 Bipolar Coping Strategies

Admittedly, I get somewhat annoyed when I read articles that offer the same generalized tips for managing bipolar. You know the ones – exercise, eat right, drink water, take your meds. Sure, all of these suggestions will help us all manage bipolar symptoms in the long run. But, what do you do when you some relief now?

Over the years, I have fashioned my own list of coping strategies that help me manage my emotions when they feel out of whack. I have an actual written checklist that I refer to on any given day when I might be experiencing disquieting emotions like sadness, anxiety, hypersensitivity, or agitation.

I cannot tell you how much this list has helped me. When I start to feel like my emotions are getting the best of me, I pull out the list and randomly pick an activity. If that one does not work, I make another selection from the list. I just keep going until I feel better, and I almost always feel better if I earnestly pursue activities that I know

work for me.

Here are five things that help me manage my bipolar and emotions:

1. **Jam to some uplifting music.** I have a special playlist of songs that pump me up or enhance feelings of being okay, and I choose music depending on my mood. When I am feeling down, I crank up the volume, sing to myself (at the top of my lungs) and dance around the house. When I am feeling too excited, I choose music that is calming and comforting. Music therapy has been proven to sooth the bipolar brain and has immediate results. It tricks your brain into thinking about something else and uplifts your mood.
2. **Call or text a friend in a support circle.** There are incredible benefits to socializing when you are afflicted with bipolar disorder. I am truly blessed to have an amazing group of women in my life who know me, understand me and continue to encourage me. I even have a code word I can send to my best friend when I am really not okay, so she will know to respond immediately. The code word is broccoli. (I know. It's funny. Go ahead and laugh!)
3. **Meditate for 20 minutes.** Many people with bipolar are afraid of meditation because they do not want to sit in silence with their own chatterbox-of-a-mind. I understand! I used to feel the same way! However, I have learned the many advantages of meditation by going to a weekly zen group. Meditation is a very simple practice. All you have to do is close your eyes and sit in silence. It gives you permission to embrace your emotions instead of running from them, which takes the power out of them.
4. **Go for a 20-minute walk.** I do not obsess about how fast I am walking or how many calories I am burning. I just put one foot in front of the other and walk 10 minutes one way and 10 minutes back. This helps work out anxious energy and helps me refocus my mind on my own health and wellness. Plus, any amount of exercise will immediately change the biological makeup of the brain and release feel-good chemicals that will make you feel better.
5. **Treat yourself to a simple pleasure.** This may be a chai tea at Starbucks or a chocolate bar. Then, I sit in the car and enjoy it. This offers me a change of scenery and allows me to indulge my senses in a pleasurable way. By the way, there is no shame in my game – I will leave the house in my pajamas when I am feeling super depressed and cannot deal with changing my clothes! I have also been known to cry into my Starbucks, but by the time I am done, I almost always feel more grounded, and the tears subside.

Keep in mind that when it comes to doing things that will change the way you feel, you will often have to exert a great deal of effort and force yourself to get into action. It can be very easy for us to get stuck in a rut and stay engaged in an unhealthy emotional cycle.

I may not feel like doing the things I have mentioned on my list, but I do them anyway because I know they will help. (Hence, why I leave the house in my pajamas or cry into my chai tea!)

Managing Your Emotions: You Have to Find What Works for You

Each one of us experiences bipolar symptoms in a way that is unique to us. When it comes to managing emotions and implementing coping strategies for dealing with bipolar, what may work for me might not work for you. For this reason, it is critical that you learn what activities help quiet your mind and soothe your emotional upset. The best way to do this is through trial and error.

Trying different things will help you learn what brings you peace and what does not. Don't be afraid to try new things. Through your own process of self-discovery, I am confident that you will stumble upon some simple practices that can help you manage painful emotions brought on by bipolar disorder.

I encourage you to start your own list of healthy coping strategies that will help you find hope and emotional healing when bipolar disorder rears its ugly head in your life. It can make all the difference in the world when it comes to your journey toward mental health. In the meantime, why not try some of the activities that have worked for me? I hope they will work for you too!