Everything You Need to Know About Bipolar Depression

by BETHANY HEINESH

Understanding Bipolar Depression

My heart goes out to anyone who is experiencing the darkness of bipolar depression right now. It is a miserable experience. It will require you to muster every ounce of strength and courage you have to continue to fight the good fight. I know from personal experience.

Because I have been diagnosed with Bipolar II, I am more prone to have bouts of depression than I am to experience manic episodes. In fact, I don't think I have ever experienced full-blown mania – only hypomania.

I have to admit – when I am hypomanic, I feel fantastic. I am surged with energy and creativity. It is a welcomed change from the depression for sure. However; hypomania does come with its own special brand of consequence and is always followed by a crash.

Anyway. We're not here to talk about the manic end of the spectrum when it comes to bipolar disorder. We're here to delve into what I like to call "the downer" aspect of this condition. For sure, being depressed is a real bummer.

I want to educate you on the topic of bipolar depression. Knowledge is power. The more you know about your condition, the better off you will be. I also want to tell you what this experience is like for me, offer you some words of encouragement, talk to you about treatment, and give you some helpful tips that will help you to avoid depression.

What Is Bipolar Depression?

Bipolar disorder is characterized by extreme shifts in moods and changes in energy. This is caused by a dysregulation of chemicals in the brain that are responsible for regulating mood. Specifically, bipolar affects the production of serotonin and dopamine, which are the brain's "feel-good" chemicals. They promote health, wellness, balanced energy, mood, and cognitive functioning.

During a manic episode, there is a surge of the brain's feel-good chemicals. This results in a blast of energy that can cause a person to lose touch with reality and have a psychotic break. It can also cause someone to compulsively and excessively engage in pleasurable activities. These may include sex, shopping, using alcohol or drugs, gambling, binge-eating, and dangerous pursuits like driving too fast.

On the flip side, bipolar depression is caused by a depletion of serotonin, dopamine, and other important neurotransmitters in the brain that affect mood.

It can lead to feelings of extreme sadness, suicidal thoughts or attempts, and the total loss of interest in daily living, it depletes you of any desire to participate in your own life joyously, and it may even cause you to feel like you don't want to go on living anymore.

What Are The Symptoms of Bipolar Depression?

If you have been diagnosed with bipolar disorder (or you think you might have this condition), it is important to recognize the symptoms of depression when they begin to manifest themselves. This will help you recognize a depressive episode at the onset.

Generally, people who experience bipolar depression have some of the same symptoms. However; some will get more depressed than others. Also, depression lasts longer for some than it does for other people.

Here are some of the most common symptoms associated with bipolar depression:

- A general feeling of being “down” (this can be quite profound and overwhelming)
- Uncontrollable crying or crying for no apparent reason
- The need to withdraw from social relationships
- Physical and mental fatigue, a lack of energy
- An overall feeling of physical weakness (even holding up your head can feel like a chore)
- The inability to focus or concentrate
- No motivation to perform basic tasks
- Irritability, hostility, or agitation with oneself or others
- The inability to laugh or smile
- Poor hygiene, no desire to take a shower or bath
- Staying in the same clothes for days or weeks
- Feelings of worthlessness and self-hatred
- Binge-eating or a loss of appetite
- Sleeping longer than usual or the inability to sleep
- Physical aches and pains
- Stomach cramps or nausea
- Negative, cynical ideas about life and the future
- Thoughts about suicide or suicide attempts

It is important to keep in mind that bipolar depression is different than situational depression.

There are times in life when it is appropriate to be depressed. The loss of a loved one, losing a job, having financial difficulties, or going through a break-up are just a few of the many occasions in life that might cause you to feel down.

However; bipolar depression seems to come on with no real explanation. Life circumstances do not necessarily trigger it. It is caused by a slowdown in the production of the brain’s feel-good chemicals. Bipolar depression just kind of shows up in your life and grabs hold of you. It can last for a week, or it can go on for months.

Bipolar depression is a horrible experience that I wouldn’t wish on my worst enemy. It can cause even the most mentally tough person to question everything they think they know about life. I have endured many bouts of severe depression, and I know what it is like to face the darkest day after day. It is mentally, emotionally, physically, and spiritually exhausting.

Next page: Thoughts that accompany bipolar depression, treatment for bipolar depression and more.

Thoughts That Often Accompany Bipolar Depression

Mental health care professionals talk a lot about the symptoms that come with a depressive episode, but they rarely talk about the thoughts that come such an experience. I have always found this to be disappointing. Whenever I research depression, I find a list of symptoms (like the ones I previously provided). But, there is a noticeable lack of information about the thought patterns that come with this aspect of bipolar disorder.

I think talking about this is very important. Bipolar depression can be life-threatening. Many people make the tragic decision to end their own life during a depressive episode. Did you know there are twice as many suicides in the United States every year than there are homicides? Suicide is the tenth leading cause of death in the United States. I think this is primarily due to the thoughts that show up when depression rears its ugly head (whether you have bipolar or not).

When bipolar depression sets in, a relentless and unending stream of negative thoughts flood your mind. The tricky part is, they come to you in your own voice. They sound like reasonable, rational thoughts that have real value. Listening to these thoughts day after day can wear you down – as if you weren't already feeling bad enough.

Here are some of the thoughts that often accompany bipolar depression:

- I am worthless. I can't do anything right. Why bother doing anything at all?
- I am a burden to my friends and family. They would be better off without me.
- This is never going to end. I can't handle the pain anymore. I should kill myself.
- Death will put an end to my pain. I want to die.
- I have been on this emotional rollercoaster for years now. It's never going to get better.
- No one really loves me. I am all alone. I don't want to be here anymore.
- I am exhausted from this fight. I give up.
- Life just goes on forever, and I don't want to do it anymore.
- Life sucks.
- I have nothing good to look forward to.
- I have tried everything to get well. Nothing ever changes.
- I am completely hopeless, and there's nothing I can do about it.

These are just a few of the many thoughts you might have when you are experiencing a depressive episode. You have to recognize these thoughts for what they are. They are lies manufactured by a sick mind. The truth is, the depression will pass, and you will stabilize. You are loved, you are valuable, you do have worth, and the world would not be the same without you in it. Don't give up.

A Word Of Caution About Self-Diagnosis

When you feel depressed, it makes sense to read articles like this one or take online quizzes in an attempt to diagnose yourself. You KNOW you are depressed. You can feel it in your bones. And, you want to get information about your condition and find out what you can do about it.

Nevertheless, it's always a good idea to see your doctor or mental health care provider to get a proper diagnosis. There may be something else going on that requires you to receive medical care. You could have a vitamin deficiency, for example, which is an easy fix. There is only so much you can learn from internet research. It's always best to trust a professional when it comes to your mental health.

Plus, if you are experiencing bipolar depression, your doctor can get you on the right track when it comes to getting proper treatment. He or she can guide you through the process of getting well again. You may think you can handle this yourself, but it's best to reach out for help if you are experiencing symptoms of depression. You don't have to go through this alone.

Treatment For Bipolar Depression

You should absolutely seek treatment from a mental health care professional if you think you have this condition. Talk to your doctor about what to do next. There are many treatment options available. These include medication or a medication adjustment, different types of therapies for depression, counseling, and peer support groups.

If you are frustrated with your mental health care provider, find someone else. If you are sick and tired of trying different medications, I understand. If you are exhausted from trying everything you can think of to get well, I have

been there. Just don't give up!

It took me years to find the right combination of medication, and I am so glad I stuck with it. I feel awesome, and I am enjoying my life. I never thought that was possible, but, here I am… all happy and balanced and stuff. I genuinely believe you can be too. Just find a compassionate doctor who is dedicated to helping you. Continue to fight for your mental health.

Next page: How to prevent a bipolar depression episode and some words of encouragement.

How To Maintain A Stable, Balanced Mood To Prevent Bipolar Depression

You may have heard the expression that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. This is so true when it comes to having bipolar disorder. Your best bet is to try and prevent bipolar depression before it happens. There is a lot you can do to maintain a balanced mood.

The more proactive you are when it comes to your own health and wellness, the less likely you are to slip into a depressive episode. When you engage in activities that promote the production of feel-good chemicals in the brain, you are a lot more likely to remain stabilized.

This requires dedication, commitment, and self-discipline – which isn't easy, of course. But, it's definitely worth giving it your best effort to try and stay balanced. Your brain will thank you for it!

Here are five suggestions for maintaining a balanced mood:

1. Take a Walk

I know, I know….. you've heard it before. Exercise is good for your health, blah, blah, blah. This is so much easier said than done when you struggle with stability. However; I encourage you to commit to walk for thirty minutes three times a week (or do more if you want to). I promise it will make all the difference.

You don't have to be a power walker or set out to finish a half-marathon. Just walk! You can even do it in your pajamas in your neighborhood! (Who cares!) All you have to do is walk out your front door and walk 15 minutes one way and 15 minutes back. It's easier than you think.

Walking is a meditative practice that powerfully affects the way the mind works. It also helps regulate those feel-good chemicals I have talked about. Doing this will get easier with time. If you make it a habit, it will become second nature to get out there and exercise.

2. Take Your Medication Regularly

If you have been prescribed antidepressants, mood stabilizers, or other types of medications to treat bipolar disorder, be sure you take them at the same time of day every day. Those of us with bipolar disorder are notorious for skipping meds or stopping them without consulting with the doc. Don't do this.

If you have bipolar disorder and you are not taking medication, consider doing so. Antidepressants, for example, can significantly reduce the likelihood of slipping into a depressive episode. They can also shift your brain chemistry and help you move away from the bummer end of the bipolar spectrum if you are there now.

3. Meditate

I cannot tell you how much meditation has changed my life. It was tough at first to quiet the chattering of my mind and sit still with myself. But, I just decided to stay with it. I work with a Zen guru, and he promised me it would get better. He was right.

Meditation has significantly reduced my mental chatter, chronic anxiety, irritability, and restlessness. It has helped to stabilize my mood and increased my sense of wellness. It has cured my insomnia. It can do the same things for you.

There are plenty of meditation instruction videos on YouTube. Check them out! You will find that meditating is really nothing more than sitting still with your eyes closed and taking deep breaths. Give it a try!

4. Stay Connected To People Who Love You

Studies have shown that social connections help us feel better about who we are. They bring joy and meaning into our lives. Staying in communication with people who care about us (even when we feel the need to isolate) helps to keep us grounded. Relationships with good people promote health and wellness.

Let people in. Be open about your difficulties. You will find that you are not alone. Even people who don't have bipolar disorder struggle with loneliness, depression, anxiety, and stress. Talking about your experiences will help ease the burdens you carry. Pain shared is pain lessened.

5. Be Kind To Yourself

Those of us who live with bipolar disorder struggle with shame, guilt, and self-loathing. We can be incredibly hard on ourselves. Learning to love yourself and being patient with yourself goes a long way when it comes to managing this illness. When you are harsh and unforgiving toward yourself, you are inviting depression to come in and take up residence in your spirit.

If, on the other hand, you accept yourself and treat yourself with kindness, you open the door to a much more positive experience. Feeling good about yourself promotes a sense of well-being, which helps to regulate mood.

Eat right, do nice things for yourself, talk to yourself with positive affirmations, stay away from toxic people – just take good care of you. Remember – you are the only person you can never lose or leave. Since you are stuck with you, you might as well learn to enjoy your own company.

Some Words of Encouragement For Anyone Suffering From Bipolar Depression

I know what it is like to be completely hopeless, depressed, and even suicidal. As a Marine veteran, I very much struggle with a "suck it up" mentality. I also grew up in a family where I was told to "pick yourself up by the bootstraps." For these reasons, I suffered years of unnecessary pain because I kept trying to fix myself by myself. In the end, I finally accepted that I couldn't do it. I had to reach out for help. It was either that or kill myself.

Today, I enjoy life. I never thought it could be this good. When I finally got on the right medication, my whole life changed for the better. I still have hypomanic and depressive episodes on occasion. They seem to come out of nowhere with no real explanation. However; they are quite brief and very manageable. I recognize them for what they are, and I know what to do when they happen.

If you are currently in the midst of a real downer, I want to tell you to keep fighting the good fight. Hold on tight to the people who love you. Walk around the block. Watch television shows or movies you enjoy. Get plenty of rest, but not too much. Seek help from your doctor or see a therapist. Eat some good, healthy foods. Adjust your medication if you need to. Find out what works for you. Do whatever you can to get well.

I promise this will pass. It may pass like a kidney stone, but it will pass! No matter how dark the night, the sun will rise again. In the meantime, keep fighting the good fight.