Succeeding in Your Career Despite Mental Illness

by ERIC PATTERSON

How to Handle Bipolar Disorder and Work

Counselor Eric Patterson and bipolar disorder warrior Sharon Davis share their tips on managing bipolar at work.

Sharon's Advice on Bipolar Disorder and Work

It is estimated that only 50-60% of people with bipolar are able to hold down full-time employment. And of those who do manage full-time employment, around 90% report distinct periods where the illness is at odds with their work.

With employers demanding more and offering less support, it can be a struggle to enjoy your job and let your best work shine through.

Basic Work Strategies

When you are bipolar you can walk through the days as a carefree hypomanic person with rose-tinted glasses one day, and a few weeks later be draped in depression, barely able to make eye contact.

Through the ups and downs of your illness, you have to show up on time, perform your job duties and strive to do that little extra bit that will help you advance your career. Here are some tips to help you make the most of being employed:

- **Develop a routine** – Go to bed and wake up at a consistent time.
- **Eat well** – Fill up on healthy foods and stay hydrated.
- **Take breaks** – Try to get up and move throughout the day.
- **Socialize** – Engage in conversations with your co-workers.
- **Remember to breathe** – Try deep breathing exercises if you are stressed.
- **Be transparent about your work and your condition** – This is helpful for your employer, should you ever have an episode and need to be out of work for a while.

When Your Mood Is Elevated

If you feel mania coming on it is best to contact your doctor and close friend who can advise you. Some other strategies include:

- **Focus** – Try to focus on one thing at a time; some people like to avoid multi-tasking so they can stay productive.
- **Using your excess energy** – Find healthy and creative outlets like exercise, music or dance.
- **Being talkative** – One of the hallmarks of mania is talking more than normal. Try to use the buddy system and involve a work friend who can let you know if you are talking too much or inappropriately.

- **Watch those emails** – During mania everything can seem larger than life, including everyday events. Be careful what you put into emails and, again, try to enlist a buddy to read important messages before you send them out.

When Your Mood Is Low

In the depressed pole of the illness, perhaps the most difficult part of work is getting there.

Many depressed people find it hard to even get out of bed and face the day. During these periods it is best to simplify your life as much as you can:

- **Personalize your space –** Decorate your bathroom mirror using sticky notes with positive affirmations, and post happy sayings in your workplace.
- **Connect with co-workers –** As much as you may want to cocoon and keep to yourself, reaching out to other people at work will help you feel more connected.
- **Don't multitask –** Focus on completing one task at a time.
- **Keep cool –** Try to diffuse or work around stressful situations.
- **Give yourself positive reinforcement –** Reward yourself for getting through a difficult time by taking a relaxing walk or maybe splurge on a massage.

Disclosing Your Illness

You are under no obligation to disclose your disability to your employer. It is up to you as to when you disclose and to whom you choose to confide in.

Some people go years or even decades without letting their employer know about their illness and some never make the disclosure. If your work is going well there is no reason to tell the employer.

If, however, things are not going well it can be important to carefully disclose your illness. At this point it is important to document everything, including your episodes and any related performance issues.

Speaking to HR

Document doctor visits and prognoses, and once you have your documentation, talk to someone in human resources. Although you may want to talk to your supervisor, it is best to seek out someone in HR so all official policies are followed.

In addition, your HR representative is bound by confidentiality requirements. Telling your supervisor or co-workers can seem like a good idea, but in the end, it can make your illness part of the gossip mill.

When you go to HR, have a plan. Are you going to request a reasonable accommodation? What accommodations do you need — a lighter schedule, different hours, working from home?

Are you there to request time off for treatment? Be sure you have met with those on your treatment team and are clear about how much time you will need off from work.

Sometimes treatments are planned and sometimes there are mental health crises where you find yourself in an emergency room at 3 a.m. and a friend or relative has to notify your employer. This is also a part of our illness and as much as we try to plan and be proactive, it is a part of our experience.

Final Thoughts

The stigma surrounding mental illness is still strong, especially in the workplace. I wish my illness were as easily accepted as diabetes or heart disease, but it isn’t.

While stigma still exists, I know I need not feel any shame as a result.

In parts of my professional life, I have soared like an eagle, in other parts I have felt like I was groping in the dark, trying to do something of value. But each day I try to go out and do the best with what I have.

Some days I have relentless energy and others I have only a small fraction of that great abundance. Some days I am confident and assured, on others, I am paranoid and scared. But I am thankful for my jobs and all they have taught me.

Next page: Counselor Eric's tips on working with bipolar disorder.

Eric's Tips for Succeeding in the Workplace

To have bipolar disorder is to experience constant change. Your mood, energy, impulse control, and life goals could radically transform within a very short period of time. While bipolar disorder is a long, changing process, the workplace is defined by routines and consistency.

Many people ask whether or not it’s possible to work while living with bipolar disorder, and the answer is yes! The road may be full of obstacles; beginning a job or maintaining a thriving career is possible for people with bipolar disorder.

Our society is much more accepting and accommodating to those with disorders today than it was even several years ago, especially the workplace. Here is how to achieve success in the workplace with bipolar disorder:

Track Your Symptoms

Accurate self-monitoring is essential both at work and at home. Patterns of symptom changes can be observed and recorded: are you impacted by the changing seasons or rainy days? Do some work tasks swing your bipolar symptoms more than others?

People with bipolar disorder learn that periods of mania or severe depression last for finite periods of time, and understanding these shifts will provide the information you need to move forward.

Take Care of Yourself

If you find your mood declining or your ability to sleep has become a problem, use your self-help skills! Check-in with your therapist and your prescriber, call a friend or speak with a family member. Only once you have taken care of yourself will you be able to care for others.

Do Not Keep It a Secret

Always advocate on your own behalf in the workplace. Do you have a human resources associate, a union representative or an understanding supervisor? Speak to them!

If a medical provider has diagnosed you with your disability, you are eligible to participate in the Americans with Disabilities Act; you cannot be fired from your position because of your disability. On the contrary, you may qualify for special accommodations.

Use the information you have gathered and communicate this to the appropriate person(s). Chances are you will be provided with helpful resources, and access to the Employee Assistance Program (which provides counseling) or information about the Family Medical Leave Act, which can extend your time off.

Build a Plan of Action

When your symptoms are under control, come up with a plan with your employer that details the course of action to be taken when your symptoms spike. Be honest with yourself and with your employer.

Provide information about previous depressive and manic episodes and let them know what interventions have proved helpful. Be a good listener — your employer may have ideas you have not yet considered.

Know When to Walk Away

Be realistic about the impact work is having on you and your ability to perform duties as required. Not every job is right for everyone; people change, symptoms change, and knowing when to walk away from a detrimental situation should be considered a success. Always be fair to yourself.