4 Tips for Navigating College With Bipolar

by BETHANY HEINESH

Bipolar and School

If you have decided to pursue higher education, I applaud you. This is quite an undertaking, even for those who do not struggle with mental illness. For those of us with bipolar disorder, going to college can be a downright daunting task.

I have a master's degree. My graduate program took three and a half years, just like it was supposed to. However, I did not have that experience getting my bachelor's degree. It took me 11 years of a sincere effort to obtain my public relations degree.

It was not until the last year of my undergraduate program that I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder and began treating my illness. Then, things began to get better. I can tell you that I did struggle for years to work while managing a full course load so that I could be successful in my academic studies.

You Can Get Your Degree With Mental Illness

Somewhere along the way, I made up my mind that – no matter what – I was going to finish. I had manic episodes and periods of prolonged depression, which interfered greatly with my attendance and performance. When I finally graduated, I had a 2.5 GPA, but I had that bachelor's degree!

My point is that it is possible to go to college with bipolar disorder. Yes, it will be a challenge. It will be difficult. At some points along the way you may experience an overwhelming feeling of agony. But, as the saying goes, everything in life is worth working for.

How to Navigate School With Bipolar Disorder

I want to share a few tips with you that I learned along the way on how to manage both bipolar and school successfully. I have full faith and confidence in your ability to get that degree. Hopefully, these pointers will help you along the way.

1. Take Advantage of Disability Accommodations

It was not until I was years into my bachelor's program that became aware that I qualified for disability accommodations. I wish I had known about this sooner. I believe I would have significantly benefitted and it would not have taken me so long to graduate.

Under federal disability law, bipolar is a medically recognized disability. The Americans With Disabilities Act ensures that we are entitled to special accommodations when we are attending school. The university or college must provide these accommodations to you so that you may have an equal opportunity to participate in an academic program.

The fact is that a person with bipolar learns differently and at a slower rate than someone who does not have bipolar disorder. Disability accommodations mean that professors have to give you more time on assignments and exams. It may also mean that you are entitled to a note-taker who accompanies you to class and takes notes for you. There are a few different accommodations available to you.

You will be able to find disability information on your school's website or by contacting the disability office. You will have to fill out paperwork and will most likely have to have a letter from your doctor. Many doctors are familiar with special disability accommodations and will be able to help you file the appropriate paperwork.

Looking into disability accommodations is worthwhile. Do not let any fear or shame prevent you from getting the help you need. You are significantly improving the likelihood of getting your degree when you acknowledge that you need some extra help. It is your right to have that help.

2. Pursue a Medical Withdrawal When You Need To

There may be times when mania or depression get the best of you while you are in college. If you need to withdrawal to get your mental health back on track, permit yourself to so. It is okay to take time when you need it in order to return to a place of wellness.

Most people do not know about the medical withdrawal. When the need arises to withdraw from your classes because of bipolar, you can do so for medical reasons. This will require a letter from your doctor that explains that you have a mental illness, you are under medical care and you will not be able to finish the semester.

When you medically withdrawal from school, there are no penalties for financial aid, and it is looked upon differently by the university. It is not that you did not want to finish the semester, or that you were lazy, or that you were partying instead of going to class. You were incapable of meeting the demands of your academic course load due to medical reasons.

3. Utilize Available Counseling Services

Most colleges and universities provide free or very low-cost counseling services to students. I spent a year in therapy during my undergraduate work with a psychologist at absolutely no cost to me. During this time, she provided me with a letter of medical withdrawal, and I saw her while I was not attending school. She was the one who first diagnosed me with bipolar disorder.

More and more campuses across the U.S. are starting to recognize how detrimental mental health services can be for college students. The suicide rate among young adults aged 15 to 24 has more than tripled since the 1950s. You might be surprised to learn that suicide is currently the second leading cause of death among college students. For this reason, and so many others, colleges and universities recognize the intrinsic value of providing mental health services to students. These include individual and group sessions.

Take advantage of this opportunity. Tuition and fees are not cheap when you are attending college. I encourage you to take advantage of every single resource offered to you in the name of mental health.

4. Remember: It is Not a Race

Supposedly, a bachelor's program should be completed in four years. I have never known one single person who got a college degree in four years or less. Most of us have to work while attending school or have families to take care of, and we do not always have the financial resources to attend school consistently.

As I mentioned, it took me 11 years to get my bachelor's degree. I withdrew multiple times because of my illness. For a while, I beat myself up for not being able to perform well in college. Every year that ticked by made me feel like more of a failure. But, the day came when I decided that I didn't care how long it took – I was on my journey, and I was not going to give up no matter what.

There is no race to the finish line. There is no competition with others – the competition is between you and yourself. Everyday, you have to strive to reach a higher self. But, the trip through college years is not a straight line for people with bipolar. There are a lot of scenic routes, detours, mountaintops and valleys along the way.

It does not matter how long it takes. Just do not give up!