5 Tips for Supporting a Family Member with Bipolar Disorder

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The Importance of Supporting a Family Member with Bipolar Disorder

The National Institute on Mental Illness (NAMI) defines bipolar disorder as "a mental illness that causes dramatic shifts in a person's mood, energy and ability to think clearly. People with bipolar experience high and low moods — known as mania and depression — which differ from the typical ups-and-downs most people experience".

When a loved one has bipolar disorder, it can wreak havoc on the entire family. Unlike a physical illness such as cancer, people often react differently to mental illnesses.

Reacting to Illnesses

With a cancer diagnosis, family members generally rally around their sick loved one. They profess their unwavering commitment to go to any lengths to participate in the healing process. They also become willing to provide ongoing support to other members of the family as well.

This is often not true when someone in the family has a mental illness like bipolar disorder. Quite often, family members have one or more of the following reactions:

- Questioning if their family member is making the whole thing up
- Blaming their loved one for being sick
- Accusing them of being weak, lazy, or irresponsible
- Doubting the diagnosis
- Believing they can just "get over it" or "snap out of it"
- Thinking that something as simple as fresh air and exercise will fix it

This is unfortunate. A mental illness is just as legitimate and serious as a physical disease, and it should be treated as such. Sick family members with bipolar disorder are deserving of love, care, and support.

In this article, I will share some personal experience with my own mental illness. I will explain how my own father mishandled it, how that was detrimental to my health, and how his attitudes prolonged my sickness for years.

I will also share five tips for supporting a family member with bipolar disorder so you can learn from our family's mistakes.

Let's get started.

How a Family Member's Lack of Support Can Reap Negative Consequences

I have been living with bipolar disorder since I was 14 years old. I have been managing it since I was 32. There is a big difference. Today, I am 42 years old and I have never been happier or healthier. I'm also an all-around

better human being. I wish I would have addressed my mental health years sooner.

But I didn’t.

And, the reason I did not is because I was raised by a single father who didn’t believe mental illness was a real thing. He always told me that mental illness was "all in my head" and that I should just "pull myself up by my bootstraps" and "get on with it". My dad’s sentiments dominated my thinking well into adulthood.

My dad legitimately thought my ongoing employment issues were just a manifestation of laziness, that my chronic substance abuse (or, more appropriately, self-medication) was me choosing to "party" instead of being responsible, and that my suffering was a manifestation of self-pity.

There was never any doubt that my dad loved me dearly. However, he missed the mark when it came to addressing my very obvious and very destructive mental illness.

I don’t blame my dad. His attitudes were born of ignorance from a generation that cultivated stigma against the mentally ill. (We still have a long way to go when it comes to stigma, but we’re getting there.)

Breaking Free from My Dad’s Ignorance Meant Finding Healing for Myself

Like most of us, I adopted the mindset that was passed down to me: mental illness doesn’t exist. It’s all in my head. Shake it off. C’mon, get it together.

The problem was that I couldn’t shake it off. I couldn’t get it together. I tried, God knows I tried, but that’s the thing about mental illness: You can’t just shake it off. You can’t just overcome it with your own strength. It requires medical treatment from a doctor.

After battling an addiction to crack and other drugs for decades, several trips to jail, multiple failed attempts at getting a college education, and losing a handful of prestigious jobs, I reached out for help from a psychiatrist.

Since then, I have been committed to a mental health journey that has brought me to the here and now where it is well with my soul.

There is a saying I wish more of us would pay mind to: "wise is the man who learns from his mistakes. Wise is the man who learns from the other man’s mistakes".

If you have a family member with bipolar disorder, please learn from my dad’s mistakes.

#1: Educate Yourself About Bipolar Disorder

If you want to help your loved one, I encourage you to read everything you can get your hands on about bipolar disorder. Talk to doctors and mental health professionals. Talk to people who have the illness and are managing it with medication and therapy.

You simply must have a firm grasp on what this illness is all about. As the saying goes, knowledge is power.

The more you know about bipolar disorder, the better equipped you will be to help your loved one battle this illness and be victorious in their recovery.

#2: Circle the Wagons and Create a Plan

This is what I like to call a "long haul" illness, similar to what you might expect if you were told a family member had cancer. It cannot be fixed with chicken soup and bed rest. There are a lot of important decisions to be made when a family member is sick with bipolar.

When a loved one is diagnosed with this sickness, it is critical that the entire family gets together to answer some very important questions and make a long-term plan:

- How are we going to handle this as a family unit?
- Who is prepared to be an active participant in this person's recovery?
- Is anyone unwilling to be involved in this process?
- What roles are we going to take on individually?

Your family member may need long-term housing, financial assistance, or regular transportation to medical appointments. What lengths are you willing to go to personally to see that your loved one gets the treatment they need so they can get the help they need to get well? There are many ways you can help someone with bipolar disorder.

#3: Be Compassionate: Bipolar Is a Roller-coaster of Ups and Downs

Up. Down. Up. Down. Up. Down. Bipolar disorder takes the mind on a maddening roller-coaster ride of highs and lows, one that never seems to end. If you think this is difficult and disruptive to your life, imagine how it is for the person you love.

Remember, your family member wants desperately to get off this ride, but they cannot. Genetics and biology have them strapped in for good. Keep in mind that they are sick. Not bad. Not mean. Not irresponsible. They are not well. And, more than anything else in the whole wide world, they want to be healthy and get better.

Especially on the days when it feels impossible, show the person you care about some unconditional love and compassion. This is what they desperately need the most. Their own shame and guilt can make self-love and acceptance feel impossible. Supporting a family member with bipolar disorder can truly make a significant difference.

#4: Take the Healing Process One Day at a Time

Life happens one day at a time, and so does the healing process when it comes to bipolar treatment. When you walk the road to recovery with a family member who is battling this disorder, take it one day, one step, one minute at a time.

There will be some good days. There will be some not so good days. And, truth be told, there will be some downright awful days. Take it as it comes.

At times, you will want to scream at the top of your lungs. You might even want to throw and break things. You may even want to quit and walk away. That's okay.

If breaking something makes you feel better, do it. Just try to pick something cheap and replaceable! If you need to take a short break from your family member, be sure and practice self-care.

After all, you can't pour from an empty cup.

This leads us to the next very important suggestion when it comes to supporting a family member with bipolar disorder.

#5: Find Support for Yourself Separate From the Family

As I mentioned, it is vital that you and your other family members lean on each other in your efforts to provide support for your a loved. However, it is equally important that you get help for yourself.

Having a family member with bipolar disorder can be physically exhausting, emotionally taxing, and financially draining. Where are you going to turn to make sure you don't experience caregiver burnout?

There are plenty of organizations out there that are available to provide support for family members who have bipolar loved ones. The NAMI is a great place to start.

Final Thoughts on Supporting a Family Member with Bipolar Disorder

Bipolar disorder can be managed with medication, psychotherapy, peer support, meditation, and other health-focused methodologies. Just because your family member is sick now doesn't mean they can't experience long-term wellness.

More than anything else, I want to tell you not to give up on the person you love. Thankfully, I have some amazing friends I've had in my life for the past few decades. I honestly don't know if I would still be here if God didn't bless me with these friendships. Getting support from family and friends are equally important.

Sometimes – more than anything else – the most healing medicine someone with bipolar can benefit from is another human being who cares saying, "I'm here, and I'm not going anywhere. We're in this together".

Be that person.