6 Tips for Taking Control of Your Bipolar Diagnosis

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Tips for Managing Bipolar Disorder

It's a painful experience, suffering through bipolar with no one around to guide or support you. Lack of access to professional help is bad enough, and it's so much worse when your family refuses to even consider that their child could have a life-altering mental disorder.

Although I was initially diagnosed with nonspecific bipolar disorder at 17 years old, it took me three more years to accept that I wasn't fabricating my symptoms for attention. It was another two years before my parents believed the same.

Needless to say, almost everything I know about being bipolar, I learned the hard way. In this unfortunate period of symptomatic disbelief and struggling toward emotional balance, I inadvertently discovered many of the positive lifestyle choices that tamper the edges of my bipolar disorder — and many, many more that were not.

Tip 1: Know Your Diagnosis

When you're first diagnosed with bipolar of any numeral, the first step should be to educate yourself. This starts with the medical professionals in your life. Don't be afraid to ask questions about:

- Signs and symptoms
- Medications and side effects
- Coping mechanisms
- Available resources

If you want to do some additional research, be sure to stick with reputable sources. Some useful websites to start with include:

- DBSA: The Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance, a Chicago-based group that offers resources for people diagnosed, their loved ones and the curious among us.
- BMPN: The Balanced Mind Parent Network, a nonprofit associated with the DBSA that offers support, chat forums and other personal aid to parents and children living with bipolar.
- IBPF: The International Bipolar Foundation, a San Diego-based nonprofit that promotes education, support and services for bipolar individuals and clinicians.

Tip 2: Know Yourself

Perhaps more important than knowing what bipolar looks like in general, is knowing what bipolar looks like for you. Behaviors previously attributed to a troubled teen or hyperactive adult may be indicative of a broader bipolar diagnosis.

While it doesn't always help, I've found that being able to concisely name what's happening is often the first step in gaining control. To name it is to know it, and to know it is to tame it.

It can be helpful to track your symptoms by:

- Journaling your experiences, mood swings and thought patterns at the end of the day
- Charting your moods and behavior patterns as they occur
- Logging all of your symptoms clinically

Once you know what your symptoms are, you can track your triggers if you aren't already aware of them.

Personally, my blend of emotional and psychiatric symptoms means I can trigger them multiple times daily or once a month. For example, certain sounds will stress me into a panic attack, which can then loop into a short-term manic episode. (Last time this happened, I adopted a black cat named Bean. She goes hiking in the redwoods with me. It's not always bad.)

More commonly, triggers can include poor sleep schedules, seasonal changes, interpersonal issues and substance abuse. If any of these occur in your life, even if you haven't noticed a difference, make a note and safeguard against potential swings.

Tip 3: Stay on Your Medication

One of the most straightforward tips for managing bipolar disorder surrounds your official treatment plan. If you're on medication, please, take it. No, it's not fun or cool. Yes, you may feel funky. That's an unfortunate part of the process for some, but I promise it gets better.
If you've been on your medication for six months and it's starting to work, great! You feel good now! Life is wonderful! Don't skip doses or quit your meds. Even if you feel like you don't need them anymore or you can do this alone, your doctor believes your prescription will help you. The only way your meds can do that is if you take them.

If your medications cause severe symptoms, talk to your doctor about your concerns and alternative treatment options. If you feel like your doctor isn't taking you seriously, it's absolutely okay to walk out of that office and find a doctor who will listen. Take care of yourself. Take your meds.

Tip 4: Structure Your Life

One of the toughest fights I've had is wrangling my disorder into a routine. I want to get up early, stay up late and do whatever I want in between with no consequences. But life doesn't work like that. If you have bipolar, it can't work like that.

Even if you don't stick to an exact schedule, having a routine can help you settle out of the madness. It's essential that you:

- Take your medications on time
- Get enough sleep at roughly the same time
- Eat healthy meals at regular times
- Exercise at the same times on the same days
- Schedule time for family, friends and the doctor outside of work
- Schedule alone time to unwind

Having a structure in your life can help you structure your mind by slotting it to tend to specific tasks at specific times. This may tame some of those wild desires and leave you more in command of your own head.

Tip 5: Learn Your Relaxation and Coping Mechanisms

Coping mechanisms are essential for dealing with individual symptoms and your bipolar at large. Having a few tasks to turn to in times of stress can divert your attention and calm the madness.

Exercise is an excellent coping mechanism for both mania and depression. While depression can make it hard to get moving, doing something as small as taking a walk down to the end of your street and back can uplift you at the edges. If you can make a point to exercise three to five days a week, you may be able to curb the worst of your symptoms. For the manic periods, physical exercise can relieve some of that pent-up energy and provide you with a productive goal.

Personally, I find removing diversions and focusing on one specific task to be an excellent coping mechanism. In other words, relaxing, with a purpose. In times of mania and stress, I shut off my music or throw on something instrumental and take to the kitchen with a bag of flour and an oven of possibilities. If I need out of the house, I take a drive to the redwoods and hike my heart out.

Whatever your coping mechanism, there are a few tips for managing bipolar disorder to keep in mind:

Keep your restful spaces restful:

- Don’t work on your bed if you work from home — that tangles the stress of the job with a good night’s rest.
- Don’t bring people into your house that you’re not comfortable with — even if they’re family.
- If you feel frustrated, stop what you’re doing and/or leave your restful space.

Keep technology out of it:

- Enjoy a good paperback book (gasp!)
- Draw your next comic on paper with a pen (gasp again!)
- Prepare a meal from scratch with a paper recipe book (they still make those?)

Tip 6: Avoid Isolation

This has, without a doubt, been the most challenging part of my own bipolar journey. I am a loner by nature, in no small part due to being intelligent and bullied as a child. My best friends starting at two years old were books, and I didn’t take my head out of them until I was 17 — the same year I learned I was bipolar. That made for a rough transition into society. As a result, I often intentionally holed myself away.

However, isolation is hazardous for those with bipolar, especially long-term. If you’re alone, you increase the risk of not catching critical symptoms or making dangerous decisions. Loneliness can also trigger a depressive episode. If you experience severe swings or have a history of suicidal thoughts or tendencies, being alone is especially dangerous, as all it takes to make the last decision in your life may be just a trigger away.

Keep in touch with your doctors and therapists, call, text and visit your friends and family, and don’t be afraid to reach out if your head starts to get turbulent. You can even volunteer at your local animal shelter, get involved with a sport or hobby, or form a running group or birdwatching club. Whatever gets you out of the house and around other people you enjoy is a positive step in the right direction.

While it may never be a breeze, living with bipolar doesn’t have to be a hellish nightmare. Often, it can be known, curbed and tamed to the extent that makes your life livable again. All that’s needed is a little practice. Hopefully, one or more of these tips for managing bipolar disorder will be a good fit for you as well.