Don’t Be Like Joe: Learning to Control Your Anger When You Have Bipolar

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Connecting Bipolar and Anger

Joe hadn’t slept much for the past two nights. He knew he was probably hypomanic and headed into mania, but he didn’t care. It was like all the pieces were coming together and he could see things for how they truly were.

All of his feelings felt so right, felt so justified. Especially his feelings for his boss, who he now could see was a complete moron.

Joe showered and went to work early that morning. Instead of feeling invigorated and fresh he felt paranoid and edgy, like anything could set him off. So when his boss inquired about a missed deadline he completely lost it.

He spewed derogatory phrases punctuated with four letter words. He kept shouting, even when the human resources director arrived. By the time the officer arrived he had raised his hand in a fist and was ready to land a punch.

That morning Joe lost his cool, his job and his reputation. Don’t be like Joe.

When you have bipolar disorder you often discover your anger when it is too late, once the consequences have caught up with you. Once you have burned one too many bridges or have completely shattered your family life to smithereens.

Thankfully not all of us with bipolar disorder have extreme anger management issues, but no matter where you fall on the spectrum you don’t have to give full vent to your anger. Here are some steps you can take so you don’t end up like Joe.

Make Sure You Are Taking Medications as Directed

Lapses in medication can lead to erratic behavior, including excessive anger. If you are skipping doses of medication, get back on track.

If you are taking your bipolar medication as directed and you are experiencing mania related anger, see your doctor. Many times extreme anger occurs during a manic episode. Eliminating the mania can help eliminate the anger.

Ask Others If You Have Anger Issues

Most people with bipolar disorder have incredible insight into their depression, but not into their manic traits like anger. We often need an outside perspective.

So when you are no longer angry ask a friend or family member about your anger issues. Warning — this requires a lot of humility on your part, but remember how much you can gain from this experience.

Try to Find the Root of Your Anger

When people give you feedback about your anger, don't try to justify yourself. Remember many times the root of your anger may be legitimate, even if your expression is inappropriate.

Find a therapist or someone you can talk to who can give you insight into your anger. Don't sweep things under the rug, be inquisitive.

Find Alternate Ways of Dealing With Your Anger

Becoming more aware of your anger is helpful, but it does not make it go away. You need to make a plan for what to do when your anger arises. Here are some suggestions:

- **Take a few deep breaths** – If your anger is just starting to swell, take a few cleansing breaths. If you have a mantra or a positive thought, think about it. Many times this can diffuse your anger before it starts.
- **Call for back up** – Is there a friend who will hear your story and calm you down? Is there someone you can trust with your rawest, deepest emotions? Call them. If they are not available, call someone else. A short phone call can diffuse a lot of anger and prevent a blow up.

- **Walk away** – Remove yourself from the distressing situation and catch your breath. Do you still feel the heat of your anger? Walk a little further — how do you feel now? If you've tried and tried, you may need to remove yourself from the situation if this is possible.
- **Find an outlet for your anger** – Take a walk, go to the gym, dance to loud music, bake a cake, write in a journal, create a work of art or join an important cause. Anger is a strong emotion but it can be channeled into something constructive and beautiful.

Be Aware of What Triggers Your Anger

For many of us, a person, situation or memory can trigger our anger. It is important to be aware of your triggers, write them down and integrate this knowledge into your daily life.

- **Finding your triggers** – Once again you will want to enlist the help of your therapist or a good friend who can help you deconstruct your anger and find the triggering events/people.
- **Role-play** – If possible, try to do some role-play with triggering events. Get some practice in how to deal with these situations with a therapist or friends. Work together to come up with coping skills and strategies.
- **Work it** – Once you understand your triggers and have new strategies, use them. Use them, refine them and keep using them.

Left unchecked, a little bit of anger mixed with bipolar disorder can escalate into a full-fledged deadly sin. Anger is a powerful emotion, capable of destroying years worth of work, relationships and reputation in one short episode.

Even if your anger has not yet destroyed your life, it could be making those around you miserable. Now is the time to deal with your anger. Remember — don't be like Joe.