What It’s Like Navigating Life With Bipolar Disorder

by CHARLIE KAPLAN

Living With Bipolar Disorder

Living with bipolar disorder can be chaotic — first, you’re stuck in high gear, then you’re stalling out, spinning your wheels. This pattern repeats itself, and each time it can feel discouraging as if there is no end in sight.

As hard as it can be to live with bipolar disorder, it can seem impossible to convey to friends and loved ones what it is like to endure the cycles of mania and depression. It is also challenging for those who do not live with the illness to understand just what their loved one experiences.

Charlie and Sharon share their personal experiences with living with bipolar disorder.

Mania: It Isn’t All Fun and Games

Imagine this: you are on a carousel, one that starts out slow then begins to gain speed until you’re moving so fast you can hear the wind whistling in your ears. At first, it is exhilarating, but then it becomes difficult to breathe.

Then, the light starts to dim until it fades completely. You move faster and faster in the darkness until it seems as though you will crash at any moment, that there is no end.

You cling to your seat, not sure if you’ll ever get off. This is mania.

It can be fun at first. The racing thoughts that accompany mania may be creative or insightful, latching onto one another in a fluid motion.

There may be an increase in productivity and a euphoric mood. But when you reach the higher stages, things change.

Your thoughts start to move far too quickly — so much, so they all start to mix together, and it feels impossible to pry them apart. You begin to make poor decisions because the higher you go, the less insight you have when it comes to decision making and rationality.

Signs of mania only get worse: you may spend too much money or engage in risky behavior. You may start to have hallucinations or delusions — such as seeing things that aren’t there or believing you are receiving messages from a higher power.

From the outside looking in, it may seem like a series of poor decisions or bad behavior, but the thoughts and actions that occur in mania aren’t conscious choices. Thinking shifts from the rational to irrational as you ascend higher.

Depression: More Than Sadness

Depression is different. The world starts to move in slow motion.

Perhaps you let a few tasks slide at first, but before you know it, showering and getting ready for the day can feel like a monumental accomplishment. It is as if the darkness of depression has sucked the pleasure and joy from life.

If you have not experienced depression before, it can be easy to think the individual should just push through or snap out of it. But it isn't that simple; when you are depressed and attempt to keep moving it can feel like trying to stand while hoisting an insurmountable weight against your back.

The Awkward In-Between

Between the poles of speeding up and slowing down, there is a place of balance, a place that is stable. This middle ground has to pick up the pieces left over from the destruction of mania and depression and reassemble them.

It can feel helpless watching your life periodically fall apart and then having to rebuild it. Finding a balance between the two extremes can be difficult, as is living with the aftermath of a manic or depressive episode.

And mania can be seductive. Sometimes we long for the euphoria, especially while in the grips of depression.

Navigating life with bipolar disorder is challenging. It requires sacrifice and lifestyle changes that may be undesirable, but are nonetheless necessary.

From the outside looking in it may seem easy to make positive choices, but even when you are not living with bipolar disorder, implementing change can be a difficult task.

Support Doesn't Have to Be Complicated

Many loved ones want to know what they can do to support someone diagnosed with bipolar disorder. When someone you love struggles, it can be both frustrating and heartbreaking, and often friends and families are at a loss as to what to do to help.

One of the most important things that *everyone* can do — both those diagnosed and their loved ones alike — is to educate themselves. Learning more about bipolar disorder equips the person living with it to make the appropriate lifestyle changes, and it provides insight into the disease for friends and loved ones.

Bipolar disorder is a complex illness, and the support of friends and loved ones is paramount to successfully managing the illness.

You don't need to make it better, and you don't have to impart words of wisdom. You only need to be there — to listen, to offer support, and to let your loved one know they are not alone.

It is not easy living with bipolar disorder, but the support of loved ones makes the journey more bearable.

Next page: Read about Sharon's experiences with living with bipolar disorder and on how to manage expectations, developing a routine, and striving for balance.

Living With Bipolar Disorder

Writing about living with bipolar disorder is a daunting task. There are hundreds of books, blogs, and internet article already devoted to this topic. So my goal is to share some tips based on my personal experience.

Of course, anyone with bipolar disorder should seek out medical professionals, take medications as needed and strive to live a lifestyle that does not induce mood swings or trigger manic or depressive states. This is all much easier said than done.

The reality is the living with bipolar disorder is usually incredibly unpredictable. On top of that, an effective treatment strategy can take months of trial and error, and once it is achieved, it can need constant tweaking.

"It Complicates Our Life"

Of course, while you are dealing with this complex disease your life still marches on. Bills must be paid, children must be cared for, and conflicts arise at work or in your family.

On top of all of this, you will likely have to deal with people who have little understanding or empathy when it comes to your illness. Worse yet, many of us have to live or work in situations where we must keep our illness disclosed and suffer in silence.

None of us has chosen this disease, and we cannot escape the many ways that it complicates our life. So before I go any further, I want you to pause and give yourself a big pat on the back.

You may have made mistakes, you may have been through hell and back; but you have also made many good decisions and tried your best often, even if you have not progressed has been slow or sloppy. So on that note of encouragement, I will launch into some practical tips I have learned along the way!

Learn to Manage Expectations

As I have stated originally, bipolar disorder is incredibly unpredictable. I can almost guarantee that your progress will not follow a neat, well understood straight line. In additions to ups and downs, there can be setbacks and disappointments.

Sometimes, especially as you begin your journey, it is important to communicate that you need a lot of understanding. If you are like me, during your life before bipolar disorder, you were incredibly reliable and always met your obligations.

Now there may be times when you need to cancel a lunch date or just need your friends and family to be more flexible. Don’t be afraid to make this need known. So many times our expectations of ourselves remain high, even when we are dealing with the condition that can be debilitating at times.

Develop a Routine

Creating some degree of order in your life will help you manage your condition. However, if you are like me, this is quite difficult.

When I am manic, I don’t want to slow down and put my life in order, and when I am depressed, I am an avid procrastinator and avoid anything that requires thought and action. I think what makes it hard for me is that when I attempt to create order in my life, I try to recreate the same order I had before my bipolar diagnosis.

I have found much more success when I order my life around my current needs. For example, shortly after I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder I went from being a morning person to someone who found it hard to wake up in the morning.

Yes, I could have kept my old schedule where I did a few chores and showered before leaving for work. But by moving these chores and my shower to the night before, I was able to keep order n my life while accommodating my current needs.

Strive for Balance

For many of us the years before our bipolar diagnosis were promising ones. Many of us were somewhere in our young adult lives, learning, growing and pursuing our dreams. And just as we begin to take off, bipolar disorder comes crashing into our lives and seemingly smashes everything to smithereens.

As we pick up the pieces and clean up the mess, often our goal is to put things back like they were. As we try to find our way on the road to recovery we constantly tell ourselves that we will know that we have made it when our life gets, “back to normal.”

I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder at age 35, and even though I was a well-established career woman, the whirlwinds of bipolar disorder completely uprooted my world.

For over a decade I desperately tried to put my house back in order, pouring all of my energy into resuming my “normal” life. But the harder I tried, the more the normal stressors of life seemed to cause my life to spin out of control. I vigilantly went to doctors and therapist and made progress, but I was never satisfied.

"I Took a Different Approach"

But earlier this year I took a different approach. Instead of focusing on getting my old life back, I focused on finding balance in my life. I faced the fact that my occupation as a healthcare analyst in a typical office environment was a continuous source of the stress that kept me off balance.

It was difficult for me to accept this fact. My pride would swell up, and my thought process was something like this. I was just as smart as everyone else, I had all the qualifications and then some, I should be able to do this job exceedingly well, all I needed to do was just try harder.

It took a lot of courage, but earlier this year I stood up for myself and left my position to pursue an alternate career path. It seems like a big, scary decision. But before I made this decision I carefully looked at my place in life, my finances, and my passions.

For decades I had always lived a simple life with as few financial obligations as possible. I realized this life choice had freed up my finances and I could live on less money if need be. I also could afford to take a few months off to get myself together.

So, I find myself at a new place in life, with a new goal of finding balance and from that place of balance making important decisions about my future. I realize that I am fortunate to be able to take time off to find my balance, but I encourage you to do the same. For me living with bipolar disorder is all about finding balance, instead of trying to resume my old life.