How to Help Someone With Bipolar Disorder

by ERIC PATTERSON

Helping a Loved One With Bipolar Disorder

Sharon Davis offers readers advice for helping a friend or relative with bipolar disorder based on her personal experience, while Eric Patterson offers suggestions for recognizing symptoms of bipolar disorder and helping loved ones cope.

You may know this already, but bipolar disorder is messy. Just one trip to the exhilarating mountaintop of mania followed by the crash landing into depression can leave a person's life in shambles. If you know someone with bipolar, your natural instinct may be to jump in and help clean the mess. But before you head out with your mop and bucket in hand, you should learn how to help someone with bipolar, so keep the following pointers in mind.

Give Unconditional Acceptance

Having a friend with bipolar disorder is like living with a rotation of several distinct identities. There's the reclusive depressive existing on a diet of take out and Netflix, the irresponsible idealist who speaks of unicorns and leprechauns while indulging in spending sprees. Then there's the angry person who hates everything, and finally the "normal" person who makes a living and assures the outside world that they are okay.

While you may not like each of these identities, it is important to accept the person inside, even when they let you down. Communicate your ongoing support. People with bipolar disorder face more rejection and discrimination than the rest of us. Always be kind because your phone call, hug, or smile can make their day.

Leave Your Savior Complex at the Door

So, you've read a few bipolar guidebooks and you've checked out the consumer health websites. You're now armed and ready to help your friend kick bipolar in the butt! But before you launch into your attack, remember this is not your fight. You cannot save this person and your well-intentioned attempts may make them needier and hinder their ability to manage the disease.

Instead of being a savior, focus on empowering this person. Help them tap into their own competence and capability which have been undermined by the bipolar condition. Knowing how to help someone with bipolar can include these types of positive actions.

Help With Their Treatment

- **Help them find the resources they need.** Sometimes just finding a clinician who takes your insurance can be a chore. Volunteer to call or go online and help them find a doctor, therapist, support group, or a community resource.
- **Accompany them on some of their appointments, especially in the beginning.** This is important because the patient often doesn't take in all the information or know what questions to ask. Having an

extra person there to take notes or give you a different perspective is invaluable.
- **Help them track their moods and medications.** It is helpful to keep a journal or diary of emotions, mood, and medication side effects. Encourage your friend to do record this information so that they can share it with their treatment team.
- **Keep them moving.** Sometimes people with bipolar can get stuck. Movement is one of the best non-prescription therapies for bipolar disorder. Take a walk in the park or ride bikes. If there is a houseful of children or the weather doesn't cooperate, turn up the music and have a dance contest.

Lighten Their Load

People with bipolar disorder often feel overwhelmed. Offering to help them with their daily chores is much appreciated. Be sure that you are there to help—don't do all the work and let them lay in bed. The goal is to share their work, lighten the load, and give them some company. Here are some ideas of practical things you can do:

- **Help plan and prepare meals for the week.** Bipolar medications often cause people to gain weight. To counter this, spend an afternoon helping your friend prepare healthy meals for the week. Use this time to catch up and offer support.
- **Help out with a weekend project**. Special projects like yard work, spring cleaning, or just catching up with the laundry can go undone for weeks when you are burdened by depression or caught up in mania. Roll up your sleeves and help them tackle these large tasks.
- **Listen.** Sometimes the load that a bipolar person carries is not a load of laundry or something physical, sometimes it is an emotion or a memory. Sometimes they just need to get something out into the light instead of letting it fester in the darkness. Be there to listen. Remember, it is not your job to solve their problems, it is often better to simply listen.

Take Them Out of Their Bipolar Bubble

When I was first diagnosed with bipolar disorder, I approached it with my intellect. When I was with my friends the conversation often drifted to my latest round of problems in dealing with the illness. While it was good to keep my friends updated on my illness, I wish I would have let them take me out of my bipolar bubble. I wish we had spent more time doing fun things, even though my ability to have fun was diminished. Some things you might consider include:

- **Volunteer.** People with bipolar can spend so much of their time focused on their problems and personal lives that they don't see the needs of others. Getting out and giving to others can be therapeutic and add balance to their life.
- **Do something creative.** There are craft studios and stores on every corner. Help your friend find a creative outlet. It may take several attempts before they find something that is a good fit, but finding that niche can be fun!
- **Expose them to people who are not bipolar.** At one point, I attended a weekly support group one night of the week and played team trivia with my friends another night of the week. It was a good balance. I had one night where I could be around people who understood my condition. Then I had another night where I could be Sharon the Trivia Queen, an identity that had nothing to do with bipolar disorder.

Living with bipolar disorder is often a lonely existence. Knowing how to help someone with bipolar walk this difficult path is admirable, but not easy. People with bipolar disorder can be inconsistent, moody and sometimes hard to be around. When you lose your expectations for the outcome you can enjoy the process and make someone's life better.

Next page: Eric Patterson offers his tips for recognizing the symptoms of bipolar in a loved one and how to get them help.

Eric's Tips for Helping Others With Bipolar

You are a loving, caring person. Going out of your way to help someone in need is commonplace. If a loved one needs advice, a good meal or a ride to the store, you will be there.

Lately, you have been concerned about someone close to you. They have not been acting like themselves. When you talk to each other, you notice that their opinions and views have changed. Their perspective on the world and priorities are completely different from the person you used to know. The changes make you think only one thing: bipolar disorder. It's all over TV and the internet so it makes sense that bipolar would affect someone in your life.

How to Help Someone With Bipolar

Helping someone with bipolar can be challenging because understanding the symptoms of bipolar and helping someone else notice the changes in themselves is a delicate endeavor. Follow these tips to protect the relationship and get your loved one the help that they may need. Here's how:

- **Come from a place of love.** If you are sure that you want to undertake this task consider the best method to receive the best results. The approach you take to the situation will influence everything that follows. Blurting out "You're bipolar!" at Thanksgiving is not going to be well received and will only lessen your credibility in the future. Maintaining a strong relationship will enable your message to be accepted.
- **Watch for symptoms**. If you have been noticing troubling signs and symptoms, write them down. Gathering a base of information will assist you in presenting a compelling case later. Look for changes in mood, energy levels, sleep, decision-making, risk taking and track what you see. Since the cycles of bipolar disorder are often longer than two weeks, plan to collect material for at least a month.
- **Know the criteria.** People often have misconceptions about what bipolar disorder is and how it operates. Someone being happy one minute and sad the next does not mean they have bipolar disorder. Generally, bipolar disorder means that someone has met the criteria for a manic episode as well as a depressive episode. A manic episode is a week-long period where someone has symptoms including decreased need for sleep, increased energy, inflated self-esteem, and an increase in risky behavior. A depressive episode is a two week period of low mood, low energy, sleep and/or appetite changes, and other symptoms. Someone with bipolar tends to switch between depressive and manic episodes with periods of calm in between. These episodes will present differently for different people.
- **Watch again.** Now that you know what you are look for, watch your loved one again. Are you still thinking that bipolar is a part of their life? Move on.
- **Encourage treatment.** Do you hold an advanced degree in counseling or psychiatry? If the answer is no, leave the therapy to the professionals. The best advice you can give your loved one is to seek out treatment. People with bipolar disorder typically benefit from a combination of medication and therapy. Tell them your concerns and how you think treatment would benefit them. Let them know you care and would be willing to attend appointments to increase their comfort. If they disagree, give them space. Therapy only works on the willing.

You love to help. The people in your life are lucky to have you. When it comes to bipolar, work smart, not hard. Understanding the disorder and encouraging treatment is the best course of action. Your loved one will be happy you did.