# What to Expect When Weaning Off Bipolar Medication

by HEATHER FOSTER

## Going Off Bipolar Medication

I was a very headstrong child. My grandmother used to say I was the spunkiest girl on the block. A natural leader, I craved attention and I sopped it up like gravy with a dinner roll. I always needed things to be perfect and I would never settle for less. The poor children I used to play with thought I was a dictator and dreaded when I wrote a play or musical to perform. They knew I wouldn't settle for anything less than gold.

I went into my teen years dealing with a mix of mania and depression, or at least I can see it now. I was always in a leadership position and ALWAYS bit off way more than I could chew. My manic cycles ensured that everything I did was great and always on time. I didn't sleep much.

When I transitioned into adulthood, my depressive episodes became more bothersome. I always had a lot of energy, but found myself in slumps more often than anything. I didn't know how to handle it. Because I was young, I thought binge drinking and "hanging out" would lift my spirits, but it never did.

After I gave birth to my first child, I noticed a huge change in me. I went through a terrible bout of postpartum depression that left me thinking I was a terrible mother. I would drink upwards of two bottles of wine a night and cry. Thankfully, after about six months of postpartum depression, my symptoms lightened up. I was "better."

### Diagnosis and Starting Medication

When I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder and borderline personality disorder, I was in shock. I had just given birth to my daughter... it had to be postpartum depression, right? I knew there was something that was not quite right about me, but the diagnosis scared me to death.

I had a few family members who had been diagnosed with bipolar disorder and they were really out of control most of the time. I didn't believe that was who I was or how I acted. My doctor was very kind and explained the diagnosis and my treatment. I was still scared.

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### Diagnosis and Starting Medication

I could barely remember to take my birth control, and then I could barely remember to take my prenatal vitamins! (See what I did there?) I was terrible at taking medication, and the thought of being on a medicine the rest of my life terrified me.

I thought back on the time a previous doctor had prescribed me Chantix (an antidepressant) to quit smoking. I had a terrible reaction to it. The third day I was on it I woke my husband at 1 a.m. screaming that there were 20 men

outside my window trying to kill me. The idea of taking any psychological drug was frightening to me.

I decided to take my doctors' advice, and after a few tries with other medications I found Lamictal, which helped me the most. It certainly had the least side effects compared to the others that I had tried. For a while I was OK. My medication had me pretty stable, and it did a great job of staving off my manic episodes.

**Not Feeling Like Myself**

But after a while, I started realizing that I wasn't fun anymore. My creativity was gone. I didn't feel like a zombie, but I certainly didn't feel like myself. I went through a period of not knowing what to do. I was scared to stop my medication, but I was also scared of being dull and boring. It wasn't long after that I went off my meds.

It was about three weeks in before I hit the lowest of lows; a depression that cannot be put into words. I was hopeless. I remember feeling like I was underwater. Not like I was suffocating, but that everything I heard was muffled. I couldn't concentrate. I would stare off into space and lose hours of my life in a daydream. I neglected myself and my responsibilities. The couch was my home.

My husband begged me to get back on my medication. It took him a few days of begging, but I eventually caved. A few weeks later and I felt better but my energy and excitement went away again.

Fast forward a couple more months, and I started a new job out of the house. I had been a recluse and a stay at home mom for years. I was very excited. After about a week of working, I decided that I was very happy and I didn't need my meds. My explanation was "maybe I am a victim of circumstance." I mean, I had been in the house for years with very little human interaction. Maybe I was just lonely, and not bipolar.

*Next page: learning who I really am.*

**Not Feeling Like Myself**

It didn't take long for my symptoms to return. What was worse was that I didn't even know they had returned. My husband and a close friend told me I was again showing signs of mania and I lost it. MAYBE I WAS JUST HAVING A BAD DAY!

It was the worst feeling knowing that I had been making a fool of myself without even knowing it. I was ashamed. I sat and pondered it for a while. Why do I keep going off of my medication? Where is this burning desire to be medication free coming from? I didn't know. Was it the way the meds made me feel? Or was it the way I felt about taking the meds?

I have many readers on my blog who talk to me about dealing with this same situation. It is almost like a club we have. You have to go off your medication once to be in it – and almost everyone is in the club.

**Learning Who I Really Am**

I've since gained some new perspective. I remember clearly thinking about this subject when it finally hit me. I finally had the answer to why I always went off my medication. It wasn't how I felt about them, or how they really made me feel. It was that I was so used to being unstable that I thought that was who I was.

You are born un-medicated, and unless you are diagnosed early, you go through most of your early life un-medicated. Most of what you know about yourself, you learn in those crucial years. When I was medicated I wasn't my "un-medicated yet familiar" self. I was someone else. I was who I really am.

And that isn't bad. I just don't know who that person is yet. Comparatively speaking, un-medicated Heather is way more fun and adventurous than medicated Heather. But medicated Heather is more stable. So my new goal is to not try to find a way to live without my medications, but rather to learn about who I truly am. Once the

chemicals balance out, who am I really? How do I really feel about certain things? How do I really handle things?

So to the people out there reading this, take my story and listen carefully. Before going off bipolar medication remember that your meds don’t change who you are; your meds make you who you really are. And don’t hate that person or have disdain for them. You are who you are – get to know you.