The Importance of Raising Bipolar Awareness

by BECKY WICKS

Raising Awareness About Bipolar Disorder

When I was first diagnosed with bipolar disorder six years ago, I'd never really been told much about it or any other mental illness – as a teenager there was no mental health education in school, and there wasn't much media campaigning at the time. My experiences, and learning about what other people have been through, has spurred me on in campaigning for mental health awareness, and trying to achieve results in such a stigma-filled field.

As I've progressed through my disorder and come to terms with it more, I have fought strongly for mental health awareness. I have given speeches for my local mental health team, addressing both service users and professionals about my experiences, and worked closely with them on user literature and written articles about the aspects of mental health.

I also run a blog detailing my own experiences, which I share on social media, and use to show those around me how I am feeling without having to work up to a difficult conversation. It is my hope that through these methods I can reach people who are feeling alone, or change the mind of someone who has misconceptions about bipolar or mental illness in general.

Why It's Important to Raise Bipolar Awareness

Raising mental health awareness is vital in reaching people like I was after my initial diagnosis – people who are likely vulnerable and scared, and not sure where to turn to for help, or understanding. Bipolar disorder can make you feel isolated, as you feel you are different from the rest of the world. You may feel you act differently or are treated in ways that other people might not be.

Form Connections With Others

In instances like this increased awareness can help you form connections with other people who are going through the same experiences. Reaching out to other people and starting relationships with those who feel the same way can prevent you from feeling lost, and give you someone to turn to in times of trouble.

Having people you can turn to in a crisis is crucial when you are going through a bipolar episode, and those feel too alone or unable to cope can sadly be lost to the disorder, or use self-destructive coping methods. As many as one in five people suffering with bipolar are lost to suicide, and thus it becomes even more critical to raise awareness and reduce this statistic.

Builds Understanding

As bipolar awareness grows, more people can learn about the disorder and how it might manifest itself at the start of an episode. This may be vital in helping loved ones, or even the sufferer, recognize the symptoms before they

come to a point where desperate intervention is needed. Early warning signs are often highlighted well in media awareness campaigns, and are easily accessible by everyone.

Catching bipolar disorder in order to treat it earlier in life means a much better prognosis for recovery, and is less of a strain on medical resources, as long hospital stays are avoided. Early intervention is a great asset in mental health recovery, and is becoming more prevalent in treatment now.

Provides Better Self-Management and Coping Techniques

Raising awareness of bipolar coping techniques such as mindfulness is also important, as this will help those suffering to learn how to self manage their condition as best they can, but also how to ask for help when self-management is no longer a viable option.

There are a lot of online resources on mindfulness etc. and these are useful to discuss with those around you so they can learn how best to approach you in a time of crisis, and how to help you get through it.

Fights Back Against Stigma

Unfortunately, while awareness has seen a great improvement in recent years, there is still a great deal of stigma surrounding mental health issues such as bipolar. But as awareness is increased, there is less chance of this spiraling upward and thus stigma is fought.

It is so important to not feel ashamed of having bipolar, and to not feel different from those around you. Starting to campaign for better mental health understanding yourself can be incredibly helpful in helping you to come to terms with how you might be feeling, and you can help make a difference to an issue that touches so many of us.

Ways to Raise Bipolar Awareness

- Visiting schools can help, as this teaches children about mental health, how to approach it, how to ask for help etc. at a young age. This will not only raise awareness in the next generation, but also increase the chances of a better mental health outlook for those who might eventually be diagnosed, as they have been encouraged to seek help earlier by these school visits.
- Charity events are another excellent way of raising mental health awareness, as you can discuss the reasons you are doing it with so many people, and often have a lot of fun doing whatever you have chosen – whether it's a sponsored cake sale or a skydive, it all helps to contribute towards awareness. There are many mental health charities campaigning for better awareness of bipolar etc. and they can often provide a vast amount of information on all topics so you can arm yourself with literature to take to everyone who sponsors you.
- One of the easiest and quickest ways of raising bipolar awareness is by taking to social media – there are so many groups and individuals online fighting for the same cause. Social media is a global product and allows for information to be spread rapidly, and helps awareness to reach more and more people, as so many of us use Twitter etc. in our everyday lives.
- Starting a blog can be helpful in getting feelings down, tracking moods, episode & triggers, but it can also be helpful in raising awareness of bipolar. Encouraging people to read your writing will open their eyes to how it might feel, as they are shown the experience directly through writing.

There are so many ways to raise awareness of bipolar disorder, whether it is quietly showing those around you some writing, or taking to social media for a full campaign. No matter the way bipolar awareness is raised, it is all vital in the fight against stigma, and in helping those who feel alone feel like they can turn to someone and ask for help.

The quicker we raise awareness and speak up about experiences – whether they be through personal suffering or a loved one – the more people we can reach, changing their misconceptions about mental health, or maybe even stopping someone from heading down a self-destructive path.