7 Calming Techniques to Help Cope With Bipolar and Stress

by BECKY WICKS

Exploring the Link Between Bipolar and Stress

Stress is something that will affect everyone in their daily lives, but handling a stressful situation alongside coping with bipolar disorder can make it a lot harder. Studies have shown that people with bipolar disorder are up to eight times more likely to have coping mechanisms fail when faced with stress, which leads to the likelihood of an emerging episode or bipolar relapse.

Stress tolerance levels in those who suffer from bipolar can often decrease when faced with a taxing event and they may find themselves unable to cope. This can lead to feelings of doubt, rejection, or anger – all of which could contribute to the onset of a depressive or manic episode.

While stressors are unique to each individual, common patterns can be seen, such as relationship problems, the loss of a loved one, or a new baby. Younger sufferers may also find stress levels increasing due to academic pressure, deadlines and exams. Factoring in bipolar, potential stressful events can multiply – setbacks in recovery, frustration with treatment and the stigma surrounding mental health can all contribute towards higher stress levels.

Additionally, pressure and tension can be harder to handle while dealing with bipolar disorder, as emotional responses might be different from the ones that might be expected. Someone suffering from a manic episode might overreach himself or herself due to a greater sense of self-esteem, resulting in an exacerbation of beliefs, such as being God's gift to the world. Alternatively, someone with depressive symptoms may find themselves spiraling lower as they struggle to find the motivation to face the situation.

How to Cope With Bipolar and Stress

Basic human instinct, when faced with a stressful situation, is the fight-or-flight response – to either turn and run, or face the situation straight away, almost unprepared. When this sets in, it is possible to address the native instinct by using calming techniques to bring the body and mind back into a state of balance. Below are some suggestions for coping with bipolar and stress:

Deep Breathing Exercises

Deep breathing exercises are one example of a stabilization method. Alternatively, it can be helpful to use the mind to visualize calming and familiar scenes. These relaxation skills not only bring the mind back to a steady and safe place, they also have physically soothing effects on the body – decreasing muscle tension, slowing an elevated heart rate and helping to normalize breathing rhythms.

Make a List and Prioritize

In situations where it seems like there are too many tasks to handle, and there is too much going on at once, it is

useful to prioritize everything in order to gain perspective on what is actually pressing and important. One simple way of doing this is to use lists to write down everything that needs to be achieved, and then arranging the items by how critical it is to complete them.

Planning actions may also be helpful, and will often naturally follow on from list making. Deciding how to approach a situation and discussing it with others beforehand can provide reassurance, often resulting in a better outcome.

Reach Out for Support and Help

It is also important to always keep treatment as a matter of significance, as letting this slip or become an afterthought could result in a dangerous deterioration of mental wellness. Therapists, psychologists and other mental health professionals are trained listeners and can provide valuable insight into both the state of mind and the situation being faced.

Personal limits should be taken into account when dealing with stress, as attempting to deal with too much at once may result in negative feelings and possible reemergence of symptoms.

As well as asking professionals to help, it can be useful to approach family and friends to ask for assistance in maintaining a level head. Impartial opinions can often be valuable in managing stress levels and providing a new perspective on issues.

It can be difficult to initially ask for help, especially for someone with bipolar, as they may think they are failing themselves. However, it is important to realize that needing assistance is something that happens to everyone, and requesting help is a useful and productive skill to have in the long term.

Take Time Out for Yourself

One major factor in managing stress levels with bipolar is for the person affected to take time out for themselves. Having some time alone is vital in providing a space in which it is possible to clear the mind, get the troubling thoughts into order, and gain some perspective on the situation. Even if the time taken is only a tea break, this is vital in giving a safe space for some personal reflection.

This technique is especially important for people who might be experiencing manic symptoms as it allows for a clearer focus on thoughts that could be moving too quickly, and it provides the opportunity to assess how viable the thoughts with regards to the stressful situation.

Focus On Taking Care of Yourself

Taking good care of the body is another important factor in both providing stress relief, and stopping it from initially happening. Bad health can result in stressful situations, and measures should be taken to avoid this happening where possible.

While alcohol, tobacco and street drugs may provide temporary relief from stressful situations, in the long term they will result in much larger problems. Having bipolar disorder increases the risk of addiction and drug use, and therefore it is important to be mindful of these factors.

Get Some Rest

Sleep is also crucial in maintaining mental wellness; suffering a disturbed sleep cycle for more than a few days can result in an imbalance in mental health and be the precursor to an episode. Struggling to sleep is common in bipolar, but there are ways in which people with the disorder can help themselves sleep, such as avoiding any white light devices (such as laptops, smart phones and tablets) for 30 minutes before bed, taking a long bath and avoiding caffeine where possible.

Learn Mindfulness Techniques

Learning mindfulness techniques can be a strong tool in overcoming stressful situations and managing the negative symptoms associated with it. There are many professionals that can teach these skills, however, it is also possible for an individual to discover these him or herself.

There are many websites that provide exercises in mindfulness, and tips on how to maintain this state of mind on a more long-term basis.

My Experience With Bipolar and Stress

Stress can be something that is very hard to manage at times, especially for those who are diagnosed with bipolar disorder or other mental health issues. It is possible, however, to be able to get through life with lessened stress levels using tips such as the ones listed above.

As I have gone through the various episodes of my illness, and as I have continued on my mental health journey, I have learned and used each of these de-stressing techniques at different times to help manage my stress levels. These are valuable skills that anyone can use, but as someone with a diagnosis of bipolar disorder, I have found them especially helpful in aiding me to get through challenging situations that I have faced.

Of course, if all of the above has not worked; there is always the punching bag at the gym!