How Your Bipolar Symptoms Change in the Springtime

by ERIC PATTERSON

Bipolar in Spring

It's here. It's finally here. The snow has melted, the birds are chirping outside your windows and flowers are beginning to poke through the ground. The long winter is over. It's spring.

If you have bipolar disorder with seasonal pattern, this is the time of year you have been waiting for since fall began. Bipolar disorder with seasonal pattern, commonly referred to seasonal affective disorder (SAD), is marked by mood changes based on the season. With this diagnosis, periods of depression typically occur during the fall and winter while periods of normal functioning or mania symptoms present in the spring in summer. Even though symptoms can happen during the off-season, with spring in the air, depression takes a back seat.

This time of year is about making the most of your decreased depression. At the same time, there is a need to monitor yourself and your symptoms so that mania does not fuel irreversible mistakes. As usual, the best plans start with a solid foundation of knowledge about your bipolar disorder. You have to know what you are fighting to win the battle.

Seasons and Moods

There are many reasons for changing symptoms based on the weather. SAD is something that most people experience on some level regardless of their mental health diagnosis. During the cold, dark winter months, people report lower energy and a worse mood illustrated by being sadder, grumpier or more irritable. On the other hand, spring and summer are full of hope and optimism. The new season is a new opportunity to complete goals.

The reason for the change is linked to several biological factors including circadian rhythms, serotonin and melatonin levels. Circadian rhythms serve has your biological clock. When fall and winter come with decreased periods of sunlight during the day, your natural rhythms become disrupted triggering depression. Less sunlight is also related directly and indirectly to lower serotonin and changing melatonin levels. Serotonin is a chemical in your brain that helps control mood, and melatonin helps control your sleep patterns.

Changes

Beyond the biological factors that involve confusing amounts of chemistry, common sense behavioral factors play a large role. Consider the following changes that come in the winter months:

- **Less physical activity** – The fall and winter bring cooler weather, which becomes a great excuse to exercise less. Sure, you would love to go for a walk today, but it's too cold. Maybe the icy sidewalks pose a safety risk that is too great, or your seasonal athletics are on hiatus until the spring. Whatever the case, colder weather and less daylight lead to less physical activity that, in turn, leads to increased depression.

Next page: changes and staying safe.

Changes

- **Cabin fever** – Changing daylight and temperature are associated with worse weather. As the snow piles up or the rain falls, you are less likely to leave the house. When you stay in, you lose the mood-boosting positives that come with a change of scenery. Staying in one place too long increases boredom and boredom gives you too much time to think about negatives in your life. Dwelling on negatives is never a good idea.
- **Less socialization** – Along with the cabin fever comes less socialization. People need other people to feel a sense of acceptance and belonging. The cold weather keeps people indoors and away from trusted supports. Additionally, the isolation keeps you unable to make space between you and those in your house. Tensions can rise as the lack of separation wears down your relationship.

Be Safe

Spring means that depression is lifting, but is can also mean that manic episodes are possible. Take care to manage these symptoms through insight and action. Here's how:

- **Know yourself** – This first tip is important for any number of mental health conditions. Knowing yourself means learning what people, places and things push your buttons and understanding the role you play in allowing your buttons to be pushed. These are your triggers for mania. Look at what items can be avoided completely or minimized to some level. Your experience from the previous spring will be your guide. Ask others in your life to provide their perspective on the actions. Be aware though, some people may think your manic symptoms are funny or exciting since they do not have to live with the consequences.
- **Know your mania** – What do your manic episodes look like? What triggers your mania? Even if it seems that your symptoms do not follow a pattern, look again. Many times mania is triggered by changes in sleep or daily routine. Working shifts can adversely impact bipolar disorder because it is too difficult for your body to find balance and regulation. Monitor food and drink. Always avoid illegal drugs and alcohol since these can trigger manic episodes. Consider making a mania timeline to track episodes, possible triggers and consequences

    - **Limit risks** – With the information gained in the first two tips, you can plan ways to limit the risks of poor decision making when manic. Do you spend too much money impulsively? Then cut up your credit cards and only carry a limited amount of cash with you. Do you often speak impulsively or say things in an overly blunt manner when manic? Consider carrying a small notepad with you where you can write down your ideas or try practicing assertive communication techniques to manage the tone of your remarks. If you are not willing to stop drinking alcohol completely, find safe situations and supportive people to drink with to improve decision making.

Next page: having fun.

Be Safe

- **Share information** – The trusted supports in your life will be happy to know that you are working to limit your unwanted manic symptoms. Likely, they have been hurt by your poor choices in the past and by seeing your struggles. Happily, they will lend their services to assist you in achieving your goals. Let them know how they can be a part of your treatment team. Be sure to listen to their feedback to keep them engaged in the plan. If last spring brought manic symptoms, get back into treatment before the thaw.

And Have Fun

When the weather breaks, it is time to take steps towards self-improvement. Now is your opportunity to do all the things that you have been dreaming about since the leaves fell. It's time to take advantage. Here's how:

- **Be active.** Resist the urge to "rest" at home now that depression is lifting. Too much sitting will leave you feeling drained and sluggish. Being active actually boosts energy and stamina. Restart your exercise routines that you left in the fall. If you are approach exercise for the first time, consider the benefits of a simple walking program. By completing a 20 – 30 minute walk three times per week, you will greatly improve your mental health and physical health. Walking can help you avoid future depressive episodes by building your resources.
- **Try new things**. Having a depression throughout the winter means that you are stuck staring at the same walls and laying on the same bed or couch. Spring is the time to break out of that comfort zone and try new things. Be adventurous. Be bold and daring. Now that there are fewer reasons and excuses to not do something, there is nothing standing in your way. What do you want to try? The positive impact on mood, self-esteem and anxiety will provide incentive to do it again.

- **Be social**. Winter depression forces you into being a bad friend. You broke off plans or your depression reduced your daily contact. Use spring to be a fantastic friend, spouse or family member. Reconnect with those you love and the ones that love you. If you are feeling resentful or feeling that someone "hasn't been there" during your depression, use this opportunity to assertively clear the air and avoid future misunderstandings.
- **Accomplish goals.** Has there been something that you have been unable to complete because of the weather or mood symptoms? As long as it is positive, do it now. Run errands, clean the bathroom or pay your bills. Doing these will lead to a strong sense of accomplishment. Use moderation, though. If the choice is clean the toilet or go on a hike with friends, choose the hike 99% of the time.

Conclusion

You did it. You made it through the hardest time of the year. How you can shift focus to happiness. How are you going to keep safe? How are you going to have fun? The iron is hot. It's time to strike.