

UNDERSTANDING BIPOLAR DISORDER



DR SUSAN KRIEGLER

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Understanding and Living with Bipolar Disorder

We all have our ups and downs, our "off" days and our "on" days, but if you're suffering from bipolar disorder, these peaks and valleys are more severe. The symptoms of bipolar disorder can hurt your job and school performance, damage your relationships, and disrupt your daily life. And although bipolar disorder is treatable, many people don't recognize the warning signs and get the help they need. Since bipolar disorder tends to worsen without treatment, it's important to learn what the symptoms look like. Recognizing the problem is the first step to getting it under control.

What is Bipolar Disorder?

Bipolar disorder (also known as manic depression) causes serious shifts in mood, energy, thinking, and behaviour – from the highs of mania on one extreme, to the lows of depression on the other. More than just a fleeting good or bad mood, the cycles of bipolar disorder last for days, weeks, or months. And unlike ordinary mood swings, the mood changes of bipolar disorder are so intense that they interfere with your ability to function.

During a manic episode, a person might impulsively quit a job, charge up huge amounts on credit cards, or feel rested after sleeping two hours. During a depressive episode, the same person might be too tired to get out of bed and full of self-loathing and hopelessness over being unemployed and in debt.

The causes of bipolar disorder aren't completely understood, but it often runs in families. The first manic or depressive episode of bipolar disorder usually occurs in the teenage years or early adulthood. The symptoms can be subtle and confusing, so many people with bipolar disorder are overlooked or misdiagnosed resulting in unnecessary suffering. But with proper treatment and support, you can lead a rich and fulfilling life.

Myths & Facts About Bipolar Disorder

Myth: People with bipolar disorder can't get better or lead a normal life.

Fact: Many people with bipolar disorder have successful careers, happy family lives, and satisfying relationships. Living with bipolar disorder is challenging. But with treatment, healthy coping skills, and a solid support system, you can live fully while managing your symptoms.

Myth: People with bipolar disorder swing back and forth between mania and depression.

Fact: Some people alternate between extreme episodes of mania and depression, but most are depressed more often than they are manic. Mania may also be so mild that it goes unrecognized. People with bipolar disorder can also go for long stretches without symptoms.

Myth: Bipolar disorder only affects mood.

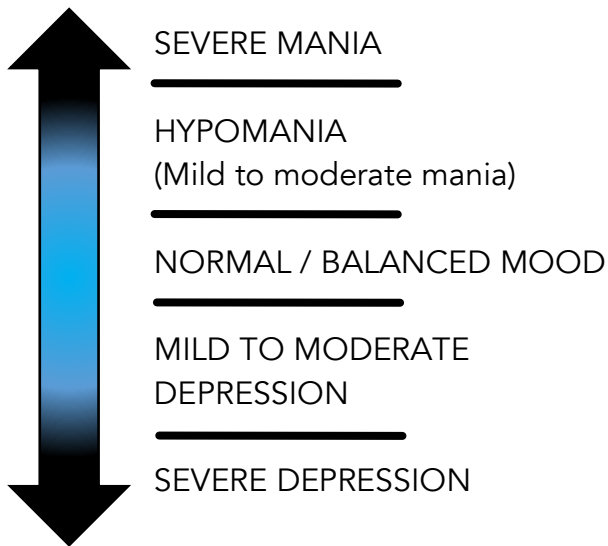
Fact: Bipolar disorder also affects your energy level, judgment, memory, concentration, appetite, sleep patterns, sex drive, and self-esteem. Additionally, bipolar disorder has been linked to anxiety, substance abuse, and health problems such as diabetes, heart disease, migraines, and high blood pressure.

Myth: Aside from taking medication, there is nothing you can do to control bipolar disorder.

Fact: While medication is the foundation of bipolar disorder treatment, therapy and self-help strategies also play important roles. You can help control your symptoms by exercising regularly, getting enough sleep, eating right, monitoring your moods, keeping stress to a minimum, and surrounding yourself with supportive people.

Signs & Symptoms of Bipolar Disorder

Bipolar disorder can look very different in different people. The symptoms vary widely in their pattern, severity, and frequency. Some people are more prone to either mania or depression, while others alternate equally between the two types of episodes. Some have frequent mood disruptions, while others experience only a few over a lifetime. There are four types of mood episodes in bipolar disorder: mania, hypomania, depression, and mixed episodes. Each type of bipolar disorder mood episode has a unique set of symptoms.



“Melancholia is the beginning part of mania. The development of a mania is really a worsening of the disease (melancholia) rather than a change into another disease.”

- Artaeus of Cappadocia
(c. 30-90 AD – source of our earliest quotes on bipolar)

Signs & Symptoms of Mania

In the manic phase of bipolar disorder, feelings of heightened energy, creativity, and euphoria are common. People experiencing a manic episode often talk a mile a minute, sleep very little, and are hyperactive. They may also feel like they’re all-powerful, invincible, or destined for greatness.

But while mania feels good at first, it has a tendency to spiral out of control. People often behave recklessly during a manic episode: gambling away savings, engaging in inappropriate sexual activity, or making foolish business investments, for example. They may also become angry, irritable, and aggressive—picking fights, lashing out when others don’t go along with their plans, and blaming anyone who criticizes their behaviour. Some people even become delusional or start hearing voices.

“When I am high, I couldn’t worry about money if I tried. So, I don’t. The money will come from somewhere; I am entitled; God will provide. Credit cards are disastrous, personal checks worse. Unfortunately, for maniacs anyway, mania is a natural extension of the economy. What with credit cards and bank accounts there is little beyond reach. So, I bought twelve snakebite kits, with a sense of urgency and importance. I bought precious stones, elegant and unnecessary furniture, three watches within an hour of one another (in the Rolex rather than Timex class: champagne tastes bubble to the surface, are the surface, in mania), and totally inappropriate siren like clothes. During one spree in London I spent several hundred pounds on books having titles or covers that somehow caught my fancy: books on the natural history of the mole, twenty sundry Penguin books because I thought it could be nice if the penguins could form a colony. Once I think I shoplifted a blouse because I could not wait a minute longer for the woman-with-molasses feet in front of me in line. Or maybe I just thought about shoplifting, I don’t remember, I was totally confused.”

I imagine I must have spent far more than thirty thousand dollars during my two major manic episodes, and God only knows how much more during my frequent milder manias.

But then back on lithium and rotating on the planet at the same pace as everyone else, you find your credit is decimated, your mortification complete: mania is not a luxury one can easily afford. It is devastating to have the illness and aggravating to have to pay for medications, blood tests, and psychotherapy. They, at least, are partially deductible. But money spent while manic doesn't fit into the Internal Revenue Service concept of medical expense or business loss. So, after mania, when most depressed, you're given excellent reason to be even more so." - Kay Redfield Jamison, An Unquiet Mind: A Memoir of Moods and Madness.

Hypomania Symptoms

Hypomania is a less severe form of mania. People in a hypomanic state feel euphoric, energetic, and productive, but they are able to carry on with their day-to-day lives and they never lose touch with reality. To others, it may seem as if people with hypomania are merely in an unusually good mood. However, hypomania can result in bad decisions that harm relationships, careers, and reputations. In addition, hypomania often escalates to full-blown mania or is followed by a major depressive episode.

Common signs and symptoms of mania include:

- Feeling unusually "high" and optimistic OR extremely irritable;
- Unrealistic, grandiose beliefs about one's abilities or powers;
- Sleeping very little, but feeling extremely energetic;
- Talking so rapidly that others can't keep up;
- Racing thoughts; jumping quickly from one idea to the next;
- Highly distractible, unable to concentrate;
- Impaired judgment and impulsiveness;
- Acting recklessly without thinking about the consequences;
- Delusions and hallucinations (in severe cases).

Signs & Symptoms of Bipolar Depression

In the past, bipolar depression was lumped in with regular depression. But a growing body of research suggests that there are significant differences between the two, especially when it comes to recommended treatments. Most people with bipolar depression are not helped by antidepressants. In fact, there is a risk that antidepressants can make bipolar disorder worse – triggering mania or hypomania, causing rapid cycling between mood states, or interfering with other mood stabilizing drugs.

Despite many similarities, certain symptoms are more common in bipolar depression than in regular depression. For example, bipolar depression is more likely to involve irritability, guilt, unpredictable mood swings, and feelings of restlessness. People with bipolar depression also tend to move and speak slowly, sleep a lot, and gain weight. In addition, they are more likely to develop psychotic depression – a condition in which they've lost contact with reality – and to experience major disability in work and social functioning.

Common symptoms of bipolar depression include:

- Feeling hopeless, sad, or empty;
- Irritability;
- Inability to experience pleasure;
- Fatigue or loss of energy.

Signs & Symptoms of a Mixed Episode

A mixed episode of bipolar disorder features symptoms of both mania or hypomania and depression. Common signs of a mixed episode include depression combined with agitation, irritability, anxiety, insomnia, distractibility, and racing thoughts. This combination of high energy and low mood makes for a particularly high risk of suicide.

"Depression is a painfully slow, crashing death. Mania is the other extreme, a wild roller coaster run off its tracks, an eight ball of coke cut with speed. It's fun and it's frightening as hell. Some patients - bipolar type I - experience both extremes; other - bipolar type II - suffer depression almost exclusively. But the "mixed state," the mercurial churning of both high and low, is the most dangerous, the deadliest. Suicide too often results from the impulsive nature and physical speed of psychotic mania coupled with depression's paranoid self-loathing." - David Lovelace, Scattershot: My Bipolar Family.

The different faces of bipolar disorder:

- **Bipolar I Disorder (mania or a mixed episode)** – The classic manic-depressive form of the illness, characterized by at least one manic episode or mixed episode. Usually—but not always—Bipolar I Disorder also involves at least one episode of depression.
- **Bipolar II Disorder (hypomania and depression)** – In Bipolar II disorder, the person doesn't experience full-blown manic episodes. Instead, the illness involves episodes of hypomania and severe depression.

- **Cyclothymia (hypomania and mild depression)** – Cyclothymia is a milder form of bipolar disorder. It consists of cyclical mood swings. However, the symptoms are less severe than full-blown mania or depression.

“There is a particular kind of pain, elation, loneliness, and terror involved in this kind of madness. When you're high it's tremendous. The ideas and feelings are fast and frequent like shooting stars, and you follow them until you find better and brighter ones. Shyness goes, the right words and gestures are suddenly there, the power to captivate others a felt certainty. There are interests found in uninteresting people. Sensuality is pervasive and the desire to seduce and be seduced irresistible. Feelings of ease, intensity, power, well-being, financial omnipotence, and euphoria pervade one's marrow. But, somewhere, this change. The fast ideas are far too fast, and there are far too many; overwhelming confusion replaces clarity. Memory goes. Humour and absorption on friends' faces are replaced by fear and concern. Everything previously moving with the grain is now against - you are irritable, angry, frightened, uncontrollable, and enmeshed totally in the blackest caves of the mind. You never knew those caves were there. It will never end, for madness carves its own reality.”

- Kay Redfield Jamison, *An Unquiet Mind: A Memoir of Moods and Madness*

Getting an Accurate Diagnosis for Bipolar Disorder

Getting an accurate diagnosis is the first step in bipolar disorder treatment. This isn't always easy. The mood swings of bipolar disorder can be difficult to distinguish from other problems such as major depression, ADHD, and borderline personality disorder. For many people with bipolar disorder, it takes years and numerous doctor visits before the problem is correctly identified and treated.

Making the diagnosis of bipolar disorder can be tricky even for trained professionals, so it's best to see a psychiatrist with experience treating bipolar disorder rather than a family doctor or another type of physician. A psychiatrist specializes in mental health and is more likely to know about the latest research and treatment options.

A diagnostic exam for bipolar disorder generally consists of the following:

- **Psychological evaluation** – The doctor or bipolar disorder specialist will conduct a complete psychiatric history. You will answer questions about your symptoms, the history of the problem, any treatment you've previously received, and your family history of mood disorders.
- **Medical history and physical** – There are no lab tests for identifying bipolar disorder. But your doctor should conduct a medical history and physical exam in order to rule out illnesses or medications that might be causing your

symptoms. Screening for thyroid disorders is particularly important, as thyroid problems can cause mood swings that mimic bipolar disorder.

In addition to taking your psychiatric and medical history, your doctor may talk to family members and friends about your moods and behaviours. Often, those close to you can give a more accurate and objective picture of your symptoms.

Medical conditions and medications that can mimic the symptoms of bipolar disorder:

- Thyroid disorders;
- Corticosteroids;
- Antidepressants;
- Adrenal disorders (e.g. Addison's disease, Cushing's syndrome);
- Anti-anxiety drugs;
- Drugs for Parkinson's disease;
- Vitamin B12 deficiency;
- Neurological disorders (e.g. epilepsy, multiple sclerosis).

Is It Bipolar Disorder or Depression?

Bipolar disorder is commonly misdiagnosed as depression. One of the reasons is that most people with bipolar disorder seek help when they're in the depressive stage of the illness. When they're in the manic stage, they don't recognize the problem. What's more, most people with bipolar disorder are depressed a much greater percentage of the time than they are manic or hypomanic.

Being misdiagnosed with depression is a potentially dangerous problem because the treatment for bipolar depression is different than for regular depression. In fact, antidepressants can actually make bipolar disorder worse. So, it's important to see a mood disorder specialist who can help you figure out what's really going on.

Indicators that your depression is really bipolar disorder:

- You've experienced repeated episodes of major depression.
- You had your first episode of major depression before age 25.
- You have a first-degree relative with bipolar disorder.
- When you're not depressed, your mood and energy levels are higher than most people's.
- When you're depressed, you oversleep and overeat.
- Your episodes of major depression are short (less than 3 months).
- You've lost contact with reality while depressed.
- You've had postpartum depression before.

- You've developed mania or hypomania while taking an antidepressant.
- Your antidepressant stopped working after several months.
- You've tried 3 or more antidepressants without success.

Treatment for Bipolar Disorder

If you spot the symptoms of bipolar depression in yourself or someone else, don't wait to get help. Ignoring the problem won't make it go away; in fact, it will almost certainly get worse. Living with untreated bipolar disorder can lead to problems in everything from your career to your relationships to your health. Diagnosing the problem as early as possible and getting into treatment can help prevent these complications.

If you're reluctant to seek treatment because you like the way you feel when you're manic, remember that the energy and euphoria come with a price. Mania and hypomania often turn destructive, hurting you and the people around you.

Basics of bipolar disorder treatment:

- **Bipolar disorder requires long-term treatment.** Since bipolar disorder is a chronic, relapsing illness, it's important to continue treatment even when you're feeling better. Most people with bipolar disorder need medication to prevent new episodes and stay symptom-free.
- **There is more to treatment than medication.** Medication alone is usually not enough to fully control the symptoms of bipolar disorder. The most effective treatment strategy for bipolar disorder involves a combination of medication, therapy, lifestyle changes, and social support.
- **It's best to work with an experienced psychiatrist.** Bipolar disorder is a complex condition. Diagnosis can be tricky, and treatment is often difficult. For safety reasons, medication should be closely monitored. A psychiatrist who is skilled in bipolar disorder treatment can help you navigate these twists and turns.

Learn more about treatment. Treatment for bipolar disorder is about more than the relief of symptoms. The true goal of treatment is recovery – getting to the point where bipolar disorder no longer disrupts your life. The right treatment plan can help you reach this goal.

Bipolar Disorder Treatment: What You Need to Know

Bipolar disorder is a lifelong condition. It runs an unpredictable course of ups and downs. When left untreated, these ups and downs can be devastating. The recurring manic and depressive episodes that characterize the disease make it difficult to lead

a stable, productive life. In the manic phase, you may be hyperactive and irresponsible. In the depressive phase, it may be difficult to do anything at all. Early diagnosis and treatment can help you avoid these problems.

Successful treatment of bipolar disorder depends on a combination of factors. Medication alone is not enough. In order to get the most out of treatment, it's important to educate yourself about the illness, communicate with your doctors and therapists, have a strong support system, make healthy lifestyle choices, and stick to your treatment plan.

Recovering from bipolar disorder doesn't happen overnight. As with the mood swings of bipolar disorder, treatment has its own ups and downs. Finding the right treatments takes time and setbacks happen. But with careful management and a commitment to getting better, you can get your symptoms under control and live fully.

Important Life Lesson: Everything Has Two Sides

Everything has two sides, and you can never have one without the other. It's not one side now and the other maybe sometime in the future; they're simultaneous. Don't wait to get old to finally understand this. Awaken to the wisdom of the ages without the aging process. Anything that you perceive as life-threatening or destroying is also life-giving and creating, if you only have the wisdom to look for it. Find that balance in your world and enter into a freedom that few people ever experience, the liberty of an inspiring and trusting life.

At any moment in your life, you will never be put down without being lifted up, nor lifted up without being put down. Positive and negative, good and bad, support and challenge, peace and war - all come together in pairs. They are simultaneous and perfectly balanced, and that is what makes up the divine order of the entire universe. If you ever see one side without the other, you're living in an illusion. Wisdom is the acknowledgement that both sides occur equally and simultaneously.

We all feel pain and pleasure. Anytime you think you're feeling more pleasure than pain, you're living an illusion; you're repressing something, and you don't even know it. Or whenever you think, I'm having more pain than pleasure, I'm suffering right now, that's also an illusion. Both emotions are just illusions, lopsided perceptions. They are the masks of tragedy and comedy that veil our true nature. The moment you balance your mind, your perceptions of pain and pleasure disappear, and you experience balance, love and peace. - John F Demartini, The Breakthrough Experience.

Medication Treatment for Bipolar Disorder

Most people with bipolar disorder need medication in order to keep their symptoms under control. When medication is continued on a long-term basis, it can reduce the frequency and severity of bipolar mood episodes, and sometimes prevent them entirely.

If you have been diagnosed with bipolar disorder, you and your doctor will work together to find the right drug or combination of drugs for your needs. Because everyone responds to medication differently, you may have to try several different medications before you find one that relieves your symptoms.

- **Check in frequently with your doctor.** It's important to have follow-up assessments to make sure that your medication levels are in the therapeutic range. Getting the dose right is a delicate balancing act. Close monitoring by your doctor will help keep you safe and symptom free.
- **Continue taking your medication, even if your mood is stable.** Don't stop taking your medication as soon as you start to feel better. Most people need to take medication long-term in order to avoid relapse.
- **Don't expect medication to fix all your problems.** Bipolar disorder medication can help reduce the symptoms of mania and depression, but in order to feel your best, it's important to lead a lifestyle that supports wellness. This includes surrounding yourself with supportive people, getting therapy, and getting plenty of rest.
- **Be extremely cautious with antidepressants.** Research shows that antidepressants are not particularly effective in the treatment of bipolar depression. Furthermore, they can trigger mania or cause rapid cycling between depression and mania in people with bipolar disorder.

Therapy for Bipolar Disorder: An Important Part of Treatment

Research indicates that people who take medications for bipolar disorder are more likely to get better faster and stay well if they also receive therapy. Therapy can teach you how to deal with problems your symptoms are causing, including relationship, work, and self-esteem issues. Therapy will also address any other problems you're struggling with, such as substance abuse or anxiety.

A few types of therapy are especially helpful in the treatment of bipolar disorder:

- Interpersonal therapy;
- Family-focused therapy;
- Cognitive behavioural therapy;
- Acceptance and commitment therapy.

Interpersonal Therapy

Interpersonal therapy focuses on current relationship issues and helps you improve the way you relate to the important people in your life. By addressing and solving interpersonal problems, this type of therapy reduces stress in your life. Since stress is a trigger for bipolar disorder, this relationship-oriented approach can help reduce mood cycling.

Family-Focused Therapy

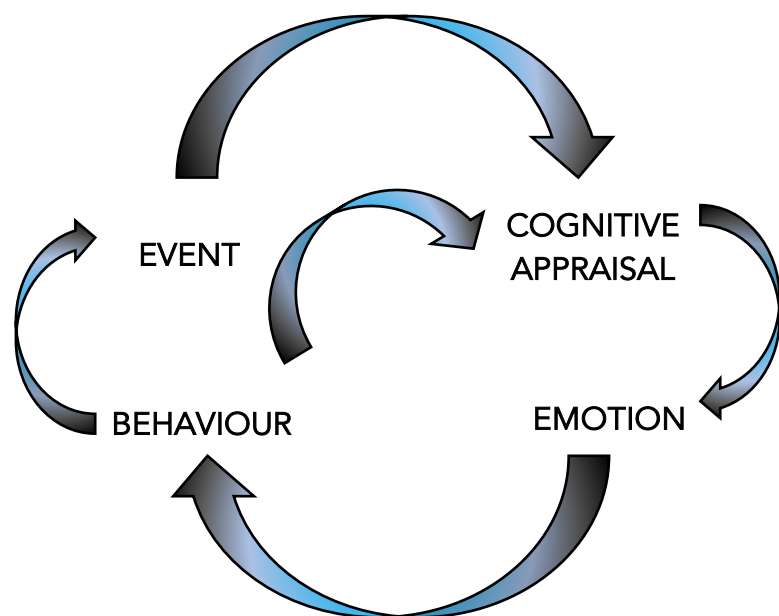
Living with a person who has bipolar disorder can be difficult, causing strain in family and marital relationships. Family-focused therapy addresses these issues and works to restore a healthy and supportive home environment. Educating family members about the disease and how to cope with its symptoms is a major component of treatment. Working through problems in the home and improving communication is also a focus of treatment.

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy – CBT

In cognitive behavioural therapy, you examine how your thoughts affect your emotions. You also learn how to change negative thinking patterns and behaviours into more positive ways of responding. For bipolar disorder, the focus is on managing symptoms, avoiding triggers for relapse, and problem solving. Studies show CBT to be as effective as antidepressant medication for the treatment of depression. CBT has also been shown to reduce the risk of relapse in bipolar disorder.

The CBT Model

The simplified model shown below helps drive specific treatment interventions and is frequently diagrammed or explained to patients as they are educated on how CBT works. A two-way relationship between cognition and behaviour is posited in which cognitive processes can influence behaviour, and behavioural change can influence cognitions. Because cognition and behaviour are so closely linked, the clinician can opt to intervene at either the cognitive or the behavioural level, using practical methods of interrupting the cycle.



Levels of Cognition

There are three major levels of cognition that are relevant to the practice of CBT: full consciousness, automatic thoughts, and schemas. Consciousness is defined as a state in which rational decisions are made with full awareness. In contrast, automatic thoughts are the more autonomous, often private cognitions that flow rapidly in the stream of everyday thinking and may not be carefully assessed for accuracy or relevance. Everyone has automatic thoughts, but in clinical states such as depression and anxiety disorders, these cognitions are often riddled with errors in logic. In depression, automatic thoughts typically centre on themes of negativity, low self-esteem, and ineffectiveness.

Schemas, or core beliefs, are the third and deepest level of cognition defined in CBT. Schemas are fundamental rules or templates for information processing that are shaped by developmental influences and other life experiences. Because they play a major role in regulating self-worth and behavioural coping strategies, schemas are a frequent target of CBT interventions. It has been suggested that schema change may account for part of the relapse prevention effect of CBT.

Examples of Automatic Thoughts & Maladaptive Schemas

AUTOMATIC THOUGHTS

- I should be doing better in life
- I've let him/her down
- I always keep messing things up
- I can't handle it
- It's too much for me
- I don't have much of a future
- Things are out of control
- I feel like giving up
- I'll never be able to get this done
- Something bad is sure to happen

MALADAPTIVE SCHEMAS

- *I must be perfect to be accepted*
- *I'm a fake*
- *If I choose to do something, I must succeed*
- *I'm unlovable*
- *No matter what I do, I won't succeed*
- *The world is too frightening for me*
- *Others can't be trusted*
- *I must always be in control*
- *I'm stupid*
- *Other people will take advantage of me*

CBT Methods - General Procedures

The term collaborative empiricism is often used to describe the therapeutic relationship in CBT. A highly collaborative relationship is established in which clinician and patient work together as a team to identify maladaptive cognitions and behaviour, test their validity, and make revisions where needed. A principal goal of this process is to help patients effectively define problems and gain skills in managing these problems.

General elements of CBT:

- Collaborative empiricism;
- Problem-orientated focus;
- Short-term treatment for uncomplicated disorders;
- Structured Methods;
- Psychoeducation;
- Homework.

Psychoeducation is another key feature of CBT. When possible, the therapist uses illustrations from the patient's own experiences to demonstrate CBT principles and procedures. Readings and other educational aids are also used extensively in CBT. As homework, patients are asked to read self-help books, pamphlets, or handouts during the beginning phases of therapy. Workbooks can be used for specific problems.

Cognitive Methods

The most important and frequently used cognitive technique is the use of questions that encourage the patient to break through rigid patterns of dysfunctional thinking and to see new perspectives. The two terms most often used to describe this form of inquiry are Socratic questioning (asking questions that guide the patient to become actively involved in finding answers) and guided discovery (a series of questions that help the patient explore and change maladaptive cognitive processes). Other frequently used cognitive techniques include imagery, role play, rehearsal exercises, and homework assignments to put modified cognitions into action.

Cognitive methods used in CBT:

- Socratic questioning;
- Guided discovery;
- Examining the evidence;
- Examining advantages and disadvantages;
- Identifying cognitive errors;
- Thought change records;
- Generating rational alternatives;
- Imagery;
- Role play;
- Rehearsal.

Acceptance & Commitment Therapy – ACT

Acceptance and commitment therapy or ACT (typically pronounced as a word, not as separate initials) is a cognitive behavioural model of psychotherapy. It is an empirically based therapy that uses acceptance and mindfulness strategies mixed in different ways with commitment and behaviour-change strategies, to increase psychological flexibility. ACT differs from traditional CBT in that rather than trying to teach people to better control their thoughts, feelings, sensations, memories and other private events, ACT teaches them to "just notice," accept, and embrace their private events, especially previously unwanted ones. ACT helps the individual get in contact with a transcendent sense of self known as "self-as-context" - the you that is always there observing and experiencing and yet distinct from one's thoughts, feelings, sensations, and memories. ACT aims to help the individual clarify their personal values and to take action on them, bringing more vitality and meaning to their life in the process, increasing their psychological flexibility.

While Western psychology has typically operated under the "healthy normality" assumption which states that by their nature, humans are psychologically healthy, ACT assumes, rather, that psychological processes of a normal human mind are often destructive.

The core conception of ACT is that psychological suffering is usually caused by experiential avoidance, cognitive entanglement, and resulting psychological rigidity that leads to a failure to take needed behavioural steps in accord with core values. As a simple way to summarize the model, ACT views the core of many problems to be due to the concepts represented in the acronym, **FEAR**:

- **F**usion with your thoughts
- **E**valuation of experience
- **A**voidance of your experience
- **R**eason-giving for your behaviour

And the healthy alternative is to **ACT**:

- **A**cept your reactions and be present
- **C**hoose a valued direction
- **T**ake action

Core Principles

ACT commonly employs six core principles to help clients develop psychological flexibility:

1. **Cognitive diffusion:** Learning methods to reduce the tendency to reify thoughts, images, emotions, and memories.
2. **Acceptance:** Allowing them to come and go without struggling with them.
3. **Contact with the present moment:** Awareness of the here and now, experienced with openness, interest, and receptiveness.
4. **Observing the self:** Accessing a transcendent sense of self, a continuity of consciousness which is unchanging.
5. **Values:** Discovering what is most important to one's true self.
6. **Committed action:** Setting goals according to values and carrying them out responsibly.

Important Life Lesson: No Pleasure Without Pain

One of the greatest illusions people fall into is the search for pleasure without pain, praise without reprimand, or nice without mean. Looking for elusive, one-sided events in a two-sided universe is the root of people's suffering. When you embrace the balance and the truth, love surrounds you. John F Demartini defines love as "the synthesis or perfect blending of all dualistic perceptions, the summation of all polarities.... It takes both positive and negative particles in perfect synthesis to create light, and in exactly the same way, you need both sides of every event to hone you in on your true nature, which is also light."

Complementary Treatments for Bipolar Disorder

Most alternative treatments for bipolar disorder are really complementary treatments, meaning they should be used in conjunction with medication, therapy, and lifestyle modification. Here are a few of the options that are showing promise:

- **Light and dark therapy** – Your easily disrupted biological clock throws you off sleep-wake cycles, which can trigger symptoms of mania and depression. Light and dark therapy regulates these biological rhythms by carefully managing your exposure to light. It involves creating an environment of regular darkness by restricting artificial light for ten hours every night.
- **Acupuncture** – Some researchers believe that it may help people with bipolar disorder by modulating their stress response. Studies on acupuncture for depression have shown a reduction in symptoms, and there is increasing evidence that acupuncture may relieve symptoms of mania also.
- **Mindfulness meditation** – Research has shown that mindfulness-based cognitive therapy and meditation help fight and prevent depression, anger, agitation, and anxiety. The mindfulness approach uses meditation, yoga, and breathing exercises to focus awareness on the present moment and break negative thinking patterns.

How Does Mindfulness Help Reduce Downward Mood Spirals?

1. When you enter a phase in your life during which you are vulnerable to depression, you lose touch with what is going on around you. It is a sort of tunnel vision; you can only see part of the landscape. You do not notice the moment when a spiral of low mood is starting.

Mindfulness practice helps you to see more clearly the patterns of the mind, and to learn how to recognize when your mood is beginning to go down. This means you can 'nip it in the bud' much earlier than before.

2. 'Losing touch' with things can put a barrier between you and the small things in life that might give you pleasure. This tendency can become extreme in clinical depression where it is known as 'anhedonia' (lack of pleasure from things we used to enjoy). But we all may know the feeling when we don't notice the small pleasures around us, especially when there is too much to do at work or home, or we are preoccupied with a project.

Mindfulness teaches you a way to get back in touch with the experience of being alive.

3. Low mood can bring back memories and thoughts from the past, and make you worry about the future.

Mindfulness helps to halt the escalation of these negative thoughts and teaches you to focus on the present moment, rather than reliving the past or pre-living the future.

4. When you start to feel low, you tend to react as if your emotions were a problem to be solved; you start trying to use your critical thinking strategies. When these do not work, you re-double your efforts to use them. You end up over-thinking, brooding, ruminating and living in your head.

Mindfulness helps you to enter an alternative mode of mind that includes thinking but is bigger than thinking. It teaches you to shift mental gears, from the mode of mind dominated by critical thinking (likely to provoke and accelerate downward mood spirals) to another mode of mind in which you experience the world directly, no conceptually, and non-judgmentally.

5. When you have been depressed, you understandably dread it coming back. At its first sign, you may try to suppress the symptoms, pretend they aren't there, or push away any unwanted thoughts or memories. But such

suppression often does not work, and the very things you tried to get rid of come back with renewed force.

Mindfulness takes a different approach. It helps develop your willingness to experience emotions, your capacity to be open to even painful emotions. It helps give you the courage to allow distressing mood, thoughts and sensations to come and go, without battling with them. We discover that difficult and unwanted thoughts and feelings can be held in awareness and seen from an altogether different perspective – a perspective that brings with it a sense of warmth and compassion to the suffering you are experiencing.

Self-Help for Bipolar Disorder

While dealing with bipolar disorder isn't always easy, it doesn't have to run your life. But in order to successfully manage bipolar disorder, you have to make smart choices. Your lifestyle and daily habits have a significant impact on your moods. Read on for ways to help yourself:

- **Get educated.** Learn as much as you can about bipolar disorder. The more you know, the better you'll be at assisting your own recovery.
- **Keep stress in check.** Avoid high-stress situations, maintain a healthy work-life balance, and try relaxation techniques such as meditation, yoga, or deep breathing.
- **Seek support.** It's important to have people you can turn to for help and encouragement. Try joining a support group or talking to a trusted friend.
- **Make healthy choices.** Healthy sleeping, eating, and exercising habits can help stabilize your moods. Keeping a regular sleep schedule is particularly important.
- **Monitor your moods.** Keep track of your symptoms and watch for signs that your moods are swinging out of control so you can stop the problem before it starts.

Bipolar Disorder & Suicide

The depressive phase of bipolar disorder is often very severe, and suicide is a major risk factor. In fact, people suffering from bipolar disorder are more likely to attempt suicide than those suffering from regular depression. Furthermore, their suicide attempts tend to be more lethal.

The risk of suicide is even higher in people with bipolar disorder who have frequent depressive episodes, mixed episodes, a history of alcohol or drug abuse, a family history of suicide, or an early onset of the disease.

The warning signs of suicide include:

- Talking about death, self-harm, or suicide;
- Feeling hopeless or helpless;
- Feeling worthless or like a burden to others.

Bipolar Disorder Causes & Triggers

Bipolar disorder has no single cause. It appears that certain people are genetically predisposed to bipolar disorder. Yet not everyone with an inherited vulnerability develops the illness, indicating that genes are not the only cause. Some brain imaging studies show physical changes in the brains of people with bipolar disorder. Other research points to neurotransmitter imbalances, abnormal thyroid function, circadian rhythm disturbances, and high levels of the stress hormone cortisol.

External environmental and psychological factors are also believed to be involved in the development of bipolar disorder. These external factors are called triggers. Triggers can set off new episodes of mania or depression or make existing symptoms worse. However, many bipolar disorder episodes occur without an obvious trigger.

- **Stress** – Stressful life events can trigger bipolar disorder in someone with a genetic vulnerability. These events tend to involve drastic or sudden changes – either good or bad – such as getting married, going away to college, losing a loved one, getting fired, or moving.
- **Substance Abuse** – While substance abuse doesn't cause bipolar disorder, it can bring on an episode and worsen the course of the disease. Drugs such as cocaine, ecstasy, and amphetamines can trigger mania, while alcohol and tranquilizers can trigger depression.
- **Medication** – Certain medications, most notably antidepressant drugs, can trigger mania. Other drugs that can cause mania include over-the-counter cold medicine, appetite suppressants, caffeine, corticosteroids, and thyroid medication.
- **Seasonal Changes** – Episodes of mania and depression often follow a seasonal pattern. Manic episodes are more common during the summer, and depressive episodes more common during the fall, winter, and spring.
- **Sleep Deprivation** – Loss of sleep - even as little as skipping a few hours of rest – can trigger an episode of mania.

Living & Coping with Bipolar Disorder

Although bipolar disorder tends to be a lifelong, recurrent illness, there are many things you can do to help yourself. Beyond the treatment you get from your doctor

or therapist, there are many things you can do to reduce your symptoms and stay on track, including educating yourself about bipolar disorder, surrounding yourself with people you can count on, and leading a healthy “wellness” lifestyle.

You’re not powerless when it comes to bipolar disorder. With good coping skills and a solid support system, you can live fully and productively and keep the symptoms of bipolar disorder in check.

Living with Bipolar Disorder: What You Can Do to Help Yourself

Living well with bipolar disorder requires certain adjustments. Like recovering alcoholics who avoid drinking or diabetics who take insulin, if you have bipolar disorder, it’s important to make healthy choices for yourself. Making these healthy choices will help you keep your symptoms under control, minimize mood episodes, and take control of your life.

Managing bipolar disorder starts with proper treatment, including medication and therapy. But there is so much more you can do to help yourself on a day to-day basis. The daily decisions you make influence the course of your illness: whether your symptoms get better or worse; whether you stay well or experience a relapse; and how quickly you rebound from a mood episode.

Bipolar Disorder: Key Recovery Concepts

- **Hope.** With good symptom management, it is possible to experience long periods of wellness. Believing that you can cope with your mood disorder is both accurate and essential to recovery.
- **Perspective.** Depression and manic depression often follow cyclical patterns. Although you may go through some painful times and it may be difficult to believe things will get better, it is important not to give up hope.
- **Personal Responsibility.** It’s up to you to take action to keep your moods stabilized. This includes asking for help from others when you need it, taking your medication as prescribed and keeping appointments with your health care providers.
- **Self-Advocacy.** Become an effective advocate for yourself so you can get the services and treatment you need and make the life you want for yourself.
- **Education.** Learn all you can about your illness. This allows you to make informed decisions about all aspects of your life and treatment.
- **Support.** Working toward wellness is up to you. However, support from others is essential to maintaining your stability and enhancing the quality of your life.

Bipolar Disorder Support Tip #1: Get Involved in Your Treatment

Be a full and active participant in your own treatment. Learn everything you can about bipolar disorder. Become an expert on the illness. Study up on the symptoms, so you can recognize them in yourself, and research all your available treatment options. The more informed you are, the better prepared you'll be to deal with symptoms and make good choices for yourself.

Using what you've learned about bipolar disorder, collaborate with your doctor or therapist in the treatment planning process. Don't be afraid to voice your opinions or questions. The most beneficial relationships between patient and healthcare provider work as a partnership. You may find it helpful to draw up a treatment contract outlining the goals you and your provider have agreed upon.

Other tips for successful bipolar disorder treatment:

- **Be patient.** Don't expect an immediate and total cure. Have patience with the treatment process. It can take time to find the right program that works for you.
- **Communicate with your treatment provider.** Keep the lines of communication open with your doctor or therapist. Your treatment program will change over time, so keep in close contact with your provider. Talk to your provider if your condition or needs change and be honest about your symptoms and any medication side effects.
- **Take your medication as instructed.** If you're taking medication, follow all instructions and take it faithfully. Don't skip or change your dose without first talking with your doctor.
- **Get therapy.** While medication may be able to manage some of the symptoms of bipolar disorder, therapy teaches you skills you can use in all areas of your life. Therapy can help you learn how to deal with your disorder, cope with problems, regulate your mood, change the way you think, and improve your relationships.

Important Life Lesson: Contradiction versus Paradox

The defensive manoeuvres of denial, repression, and projection will only last that long, until we fall into the dark hole of our own unlikableness and badness - as in depression. As Simon and Garfunkel used to sing, "Hello, darkness, my old friend, I've come to meet with you again." When the equal and opposite negative pole is stripped of its illusions and its defences, the Shadow is fully revealed, and we are sucked into the bottomless pit of darkness and depression.

Robert Johnson (Owning Your Own Shadow) says that contradiction brings the crushing burden of meaninglessness. Contradiction is barren and destructive, yet paradox is creative. It is a powerful embracing of reality. Every human experience can be expressed in terms of paradox. The electric plug in the wall has two prongs, access to a positive and negative electrical charge. From this opposition comes the usefulness of the electric current. Day is comprehensible only in contrast to night.

The same applies to masculinity - femininity; activity - rest; up - down; I - you; joy - sadness.... The way out of the dilemma of bi polarity is to embrace the contradictions within ourselves, each other, and the world.

For some incomprehensible reason, we often refuse this paradoxical nature of reality, and in an idiot moment, think we can function outside it. The very moment we do this, we translate paradox into opposition. Personal suffering begins when we are crucified between these opposites. If we try to embrace one without paying tribute to the other, we degrade paradox into contradiction. Yet both pairs of opposites must be equally honoured. This is especially true in the case of the opposition between the Shadow and the persona, evil and good, heaven and hell.

Bipolar Disorder Support Tip #2: Monitor Your Symptoms & Moods

In order to stay well, it's important to be closely attuned to the way you feel. By the time obvious symptoms of mania or depression appear, it is often too late to intercept the mood swing, so keep a close watch for subtle changes in your mood, sleeping patterns, energy level, and thoughts. If you catch the problem early and act swiftly, you may be able to prevent a minor mood change from turning into a full-blown episode of mania or depression.

Know Your Triggers & Early Warning Signs – And Watch for Them

It's important to recognize the warning signs of an oncoming manic or depressive episode. Make a list of early symptoms that preceded your previous mood episodes. Also try to identify the triggers, or outside influences, that have led to mania or depression in the past.

Learn What Your Triggers Are and Try to Avoid Them

Arguments / **Travel or time changes** / Work-related stress / **Caffeine use** / Drug use; including medications / **Change in general** / Social events / **Shopping centres** / Driving in traffic / **Poor diet; high in refined foods** / Alcohol use / **Lack of exercise** / Unstable family situations / **Poor relationship with spouse, family member, friend or co-worker** / Lack of balance in life / **Poor sleep habits, staying up too late, or sleeping**

all day / Lack of a schedule / **Lack of structure** / Too many obligations / **Constantly on the move** / Constantly doing something / **Exposure to television and other forms of media** / Hanging out with crazymaking people / **Aggression toward self or others** / Overly stimulated lifestyle / **Lack of spirituality** / Over-scheduling or overcommitting / **Listening to negative internal dialogue** / Everyday obligations / **Illness or death of a loved one** / Stressful world events.

Warning Signs of Depression

I quit cooking meals / *I no longer want to be around people* / I crave chocolate / *I start having headaches* / I don't care about anybody else / *People bother me* / I start needing more sleep, including naps during the day.

Warning Signs of Mania

Surges of energy & restlessness / **Insomnia or diminished need for sleep** / Euphoria / **Flight of ideas** / Excessive planning / **Disorganization** / Inappropriate anger / **Excessive spending** / Diminished appetite or compulsive eating / **False superiority & grandiosity** / Obsessiveness / **Over-ambitiousness** / Oversensitivity / **Assuming too much responsibility** / Nervousness & excitability / **Inability to concentrate** / Irritability & outbursts of temper / **Out-of-body sensations** / Others appear 'slow' / **Hyperactivity** / Incessant chattering / **Excessive telephoning** / Self-indulgence & inattentiveness to others / **Heightened sexuality, flirtatiousness, & promiscuity**

Knowing your early warning signs and triggers won't do you much good if you aren't keeping close tabs on how you're feeling. By checking in with yourself through regular mood monitoring, you can be sure that red flags don't get lost in the shuffle of your busy, daily life.

Keeping a mood chart is one way to monitor your symptoms and moods. A mood chart is a daily log of your emotional state and other symptoms you're having. It can also include information such as how many hours of sleep you're getting, your weight, medications you're taking, and any alcohol or drug use. You can use your mood chart to spot patterns and indicators of trouble ahead.

Develop a Wellness Toolbox

If you spot any warning signs of mania or depression, it's important to act swiftly. In such times, it's helpful to have a wellness toolbox to draw from. A wellness toolbox consists of coping skills and activities you can do to maintain a stable mood or to get better when you're feeling "off".

The coping techniques that work best will be unique to your situation, symptoms, and preferences. It takes experimentation and time to find a winning strategy. However, many people with bipolar disorder have found the following tools to be helpful in reducing symptoms and maintaining wellness:

- Talk to a supportive person;
- Get a full eight hours of sleep;
- Cut back on your activities;
- Attend a support group;
- Call your doctor or therapist;
- Do something fun or creative;
- Take time for yourself to relax and unwind;
- Write in your journal;
- Exercise;
- Ask for extra help from loved ones;
- Cut back on sugar, alcohol, and caffeine;
- Increase your exposure to light;
- Increase or decrease the stimulation in your environment.

"I'm going to be a superstar musician, kill myself, and go out in a flame of glory... I want to be rich and famous and kill myself like Jimi Hendrix."

- Kurt Cobain
(1967 – 1994)

Create an Emergency Action Plan

Despite your best efforts, there may be times when you experience a relapse into full-blown mania or severe depression. In crisis situations where your safety is at stake, your loved ones or doctor may have to take charge of your care. Such times can leave you feeling helpless and out of control, but having a crisis plan in place allows you to maintain some degree of responsibility for your own treatment.

A plan of action typically includes:

- A list of emergency contacts (your doctor, therapist, close family members);
- A list of all medications you are taking, including dosage information;
- Information about any other health problems you have;
- Symptoms that indicate you need others to take responsibility for your care;
- Treatment preferences (who you want to care for you; what treatments and medications do and do not work, who is authorized to make decisions on your behalf).

Bipolar Disorder Support Tip #3: Reach Out to Other People

If your loved one has bipolar disorder, you can be an instrumental support throughout the treatment and recovery process. Having a strong support system is vital to staying happy and healthy. Creating a supportive environment includes not just who you

surround yourself with, but who you choose to avoid. In order to take care of yourself, it's necessary to limit your contact with people who drain your emotional energy or leave you feeling discouraged, ashamed, or guilty. Instead, spend time with people who truly value you and make you feel better.

- **Turn to friends and family** – Support for bipolar disorder starts at home. It's important to have people you can count on to help you through rough times. Isolation and loneliness can cause depression, so regular contact with supportive friends and family members is therapeutic in itself.
- **Join a bipolar disorder support group** – Spending time with people who know what you're going through and can honestly say they've "been there" can be very therapeutic. You can also benefit from the shared experiences and advice of others who suffer from bipolar disorder on the internet.
- **Build new relationships** – Isolation and loneliness make bipolar disorder worse. If you don't have a support network you can count on, take steps to develop new relationships. Try taking a class, joining a church or a civic group, volunteering, or attending events in your community.

10 Tips for Reaching Out and Building Relationships

1. Talk to one person about your feelings.
2. Help someone else by volunteering.
3. Have lunch or coffee with a friend.
4. Ask a loved one to check in with you regularly.
5. Accompany someone to the movies, a concert, or a small get-together.
6. Call or email an old friend.
7. Go for a walk with a workout buddy.
8. Schedule a weekly dinner date
9. Meet new people by taking a class or joining a club.
10. Confide in a counsellor, therapist, or clergy member.

"Love is not enough. It takes courage to grab my father's demon, my own, or - God help me - my child's and strap it down and stop its mad jig; to sit in a row of white rooms filled with pills and clubbed dreamers and shout: stop smiling, shut up; shut up and stop laughing; you're sitting in hell. Stop preaching; stop weeping. You are a manic-depressive, always. your life is larger than most, unimaginable. You're blessed; just admit it and take the damn pill."

- David Lovelace
(Scattershot: My Bipolar Family)

Bipolar Disorder Support Tip #4: Develop a Daily Routine

Your lifestyle choices, including your sleeping, eating, and exercise patterns, have a significant impact on your moods. There are many things you can do in your daily life to get your symptoms under control and to keep depression and mania at bay.

- **Build structure into your life.** Developing and sticking to a daily schedule can help stabilize the mood swings of bipolar disorder. Include set times for sleeping, eating, socializing, exercising, working, and relaxing. Try to maintain a regular pattern of activity, even through emotional ups and downs.
- **Exercise regularly.** Exercise has a beneficial impact on mood and may reduce the number of bipolar episodes you experience. Aerobic exercise is especially effective at treating depression. Try to incorporate at least 30 minutes of activity five times a week into your routine. Walking is a good choice for people of all fitness levels.
- **Keep a strict sleep schedule.** Getting too little sleep can trigger mania, so it's important to get plenty of rest. For some people, losing even a few hours can cause problems. However, too much sleep can also worsen your mood. The best advice is to maintain a normal sleep schedule, going to bed and waking up at around the same time each day.

Healthy Sleep Habits for Managing Bipolar Disorder

- Go to bed and wake up at the same time each day.
- Avoid or minimize napping, especially if it interferes with your sleep at night.
- Avoid exercising or doing other stimulating activities late in the day.
- No caffeine after lunch or alcohol at night. Both interfere with sleep.

Important Life Lesson: Temperance

In the Tarot system of divination, the Temperance card summarizes the life lessons for every bipolar person. Temperance indicates that you are learning to bring about balance, patience and moderation in your life. It refers to the need to take the middle road, avoiding extremes and finding and maintaining a sense of balance and calm in your life.

Temperance is depicted as a person pouring liquid from one receptacle into another. Historically, this was a standard symbol of the virtue temperance, one of the cardinal virtues, represented by the dilution of wine with water. In many decks, the person is a winged angel usually female or androgynous and stands with one foot on water and one foot on land. In addition to its literal meaning of temperance or moderation, the Temperance card is often interpreted as symbolizing the blending or synthesis of opposites.

The angel has one foot on dry land, representative of the material world, and one foot in the water, representative of the subconscious. In this position, she also represents the need to 'test the waters' before jumping headfirst into unknown circumstances. Here she tempers the whimsical flight of the Fool who jumps without giving a second thought. In her hands, she holds two cups which she uses to mix water. The cups represent the sub- and super-conscious minds.

One cup can be thought of as holding hot water and the other cold water. The water flowing between them is actually going from the lower cup to the higher one, signifying rising from a lower plane to a higher one. The temperate individual mixes the opposites and finds a balance in life by avoiding extremes.

The universal message of the card to us all that we must learn to keep calm in situations of potential stress or anxiety. We need to learn to not let things get to us, and to find a place of peace where we can find perspective when things get hectic. Learning to strive for balance and tranquillity is what will help us to achieve and experience fulfilment. Our temperament will eventually be well balanced, and we will demonstrate good management and balance in our outlook on life.

You need to develop a clear, long-term vision of what you want to achieve. Learn not to rush things along; rather take your time to ensure that you do the best job you can. Learn to be at peace with what you are doing. Listen to your wise inner voice which guides you gently to the right outcome as you patiently listen and follow. Find a very balanced perspective on every situation and you are in better position to make the right choices.

In relation to others, Temperance represents adaptation, coordination, and tempering external influences. Learn to work in harmony with others and there will be a heightened level of cooperation in your activities with others. You will be able to combine forces and join with others in order to bring it all together. Strive for synergy at work that leverages the right mix of talents, experiences, abilities and skills.

Temperance asks you to be patient so that you can act with timing and precision. Patience and moderation will result in good management of all things. Do not feel that you need to rush, just let situations evolve naturally.

Temperance requires regular self-evaluation in order to re-examine your life priorities. Seek a much greater balance between your inner and outer selves, and search for a higher meaning and purpose in life. Throughout your recovery, you may also experience a clash between the old and the new you, sometimes feeling confused about which direction you ought to take and what is really important to you. You may consider seclusion, detachment and retreats as methods for accomplishing great things. Meditation will help you to will avoid pain, conflict and distractions and lessen your stress and anxiety. Looking inward will re-charge you.

Bipolar Disorder Support Tip #5: Keep Stress to a Minimum

Stress can trigger episodes of mania and depression in people with bipolar disorder, so keeping it under control is extremely important. Know your limits, both at home and at work or school. Don't take on more than you can handle and take time to yourself if you're feeling overwhelmed.

- **Learn how to relax.** Relaxation techniques such as deep breathing, meditation, yoga, and guided imagery can be very effective at reducing stress and keeping you on an even keel. Studies show that a daily relaxation practice of 30 minutes or more can improve your mood and keep depression at bay.
- **Make leisure time a priority.** Do things for no other reason than that it feels good to do them. Go to a funny movie, take a walk on the beach, listen to music, read a good book, or talk to a friend. Doing things just because they are fun is no indulgence. Play is an emotional and mental health necessity.
- **Appeal to your senses.** Stay calm and energized by appealing to the five senses: sight, sound, touch, smell, and taste. Listen to music that lifts your mood, place flowers where you will see and smell them, massage your hands and feet or sip a warm drink.

Learn to Recognize Stress

Recognizing stress is the first step in lessening its impact. Many of us spend so much time in a stressed state, we have forgotten what it feels like to be fully relaxed and alert. Being stressed out feels normal.

What does it feel like to be calm and stress-free? You can see that "just right" inner balance in the smile of a happy baby - a face so full of joy it reminds adults of the balanced emotional state that most of us have misplaced. In adulthood, being balanced means maintaining a calm state of energy, alertness, and focus. Calmness is more than just feeling relaxed; being alert is an equally important aspect of finding the balance needed to withstand stress.

If you don't feel calm, alert, productive, and focused most of the time in your daily life, then too much stress may be a problem for you.

Tips for Recognizing When You're Stressed

Hush the voice that's telling you, "Oh, I'm fine." Notice how your breathing has changed. Are your muscles tense? Awareness of your physical response to stress will help regulate the tension when it occurs.

When you're tired, your eyes feel heavy and you might rest your head on your hand. When you're happy, you laugh easily. And when you are stressed, your body lets you know that too. Try to get in the habit of paying attention to your body's clues.

- **Observe your muscles and insides.** Are your muscles tight/sore? Is your stomach tight or sore? Are your hands clenched?
- **Observe your breath.** Is your breath shallow? Place one hand on your belly, the other on your chest. Watch your hands rise and fall with each breath. Notice when you breathe fully or when you "forget" to breathe.

Practice Deep, Slow Diaphragmatic Breathing

Diaphragmatic breathing is the most effective way to quiet and calm the mind and soul. It helps contribute to an overall feeling of wellbeing. And who doesn't need that? Better breathing also allows oxygen to be more freely distributed to every cell in the body. The brain and all of the body's organs work much more effectively.

The relaxation response has a very positive effect on the body's overall health, including physical, mental and even spiritual wellbeing. Our nervous system, which is so often filled with tension, is soothed and stress is reduced.

Deep breathing exercises are physically energizing and help one charge one's overworked batteries. It is beneficial for those who suffer from frequent headaches. Deep breathing has the ability to change extreme tiredness into energy and restlessness into tranquillity.

Breathing a whole centring breath takes us from the centre of our physical being while uniting us with our mental and spiritual capacities. The physical, spiritual/emotional, and mental capacities work in accord. From here, we eat better, we exercise more regularly, we rest when needed. We simply make better judgements that empower life in balance.

Endorphins are endogenous opioid peptides that act as neurotransmitters. They are five hundred times more potent than morphine. They have physical and emotional pain-relieving capabilities and they give a person a sense of ease and peace. I can tell you from personal experience that deep diaphragmatic breathing releases endorphins.

Bipolar Disorder Support Tip #6: Watch What You Put in Your Body

From the food you eat to the vitamins and drugs you take, the substances you put in your body have an impact on the symptoms of bipolar disorder – both for better or worse.

- **Eat a healthy diet.** There is an undeniable link between food and mood. For optimal mood, eat plenty of fresh fruits, vegetables, and whole grains and limit your fat and sugar intake. Space your meals out through the day, so your blood sugar never dips too low. High-carbohydrate diets can cause mood crashes, so they should also be avoided. Other mood busting foods include chocolate, caffeine, and processed foods.
- **Get your omega-3s.** Omega-3 fatty acids may decrease mood swings in bipolar disorder. Omega-3 is available as a nutritional supplement. You can also increase your intake of omega-3 by eating cold-water fish such as salmon, halibut, and sardines, soybeans, flaxseeds, canola oil, pumpkin seeds, and walnuts.
- **Avoid alcohol and drugs.** Drugs such as cocaine, ecstasy, and amphetamines can trigger mania, while alcohol and tranquilizers can trigger depression. Even moderate social drinking can upset your emotional balance. Substance use also interferes with sleep and may cause dangerous interactions with your medications. Attempts to self-medicate or numb your symptoms with drugs and alcohol only create more problems.
- **Be cautious when taking any medication.** Certain prescription and over the counter medications can be problematic for people with bipolar disorder. Be especially careful with antidepressant drugs, which can trigger mania. Other drugs that can cause mania include over the counter cold medicine, appetite suppressants, caffeine, corticosteroids, and thyroid medication.

Finding a Therapist Who Can Help You Heal

Therapy is a very effective treatment for mental and emotional problems. But in order to reap its benefits, it's important to choose the right therapist – someone you trust who makes you feel cared for and has the experience to help you make changes for the better in your life.

A good therapist knows how to listen, helps you identify and understand self-defeating thoughts and behaviours, encourages you to make positive changes, and motivates you to learn and grow. But your therapist cannot do the work for you. You must be an active participant in the process. Read on to learn what to look for in a good therapist, what to expect from therapy, how to evaluate your progress, and how to make the most of your sessions.

How Therapy & Counselling Can Help

Talking about your thoughts and feelings with a supportive person makes you feel better. It can be very healing, in and of itself, to voice your worries or talk about something that's weighing on your mind. And it feels good to be listened to - to know that someone else cares about you and wants to help.

It can be very helpful to talk about your problems to close friends and family members. But sometimes, we need help that the people around us aren't able to provide. When you need extra support, an outside perspective, or some expert guidance, talking to a therapist or counsellor can help. While the support of friends and family is important, therapy is different. Therapists are professionally trained listeners who can help you get to the root of your problems, overcome emotional challenges, and make positive changes in your life.

You don't have to be diagnosed with a mental health problem to benefit from therapy. Many people in therapy seek help for everyday concerns: relationship problems, job stress, or self-doubt, for example. Others turn to therapy during difficult times, such as a divorce.

Why Therapy & Not Only Medication?

The thought of being able to solve your problems with taking a pill each day can sound appealing. If only it was that easy! Mental and emotional problems have multiple causes, and medication is not a one-stop cure.

Medication may help ease certain symptoms, but it comes with side effects. Furthermore, it cannot solve the "big picture" problems. Medication won't fix your relationships, help you figure out what to do with your life, or give you insight into why you continue to do things you know are bad for you.

Therapy can be time consuming and challenging, as uncomfortable emotions and thoughts often arise as part of the treatment process. However, therapy provides long-lasting benefits that go beyond symptom relief. Therapy gives you the tools for transforming your life – for relating better to others, building the life you want for yourself, and coping with whatever curveballs come your way.

Myths about therapy:

- **I don't need a therapist.** I'm smart enough to solve my own problems. We all have our blind spots. Intelligence has nothing to do with it. A good therapist doesn't tell you what to do or how to live your life. He or she will give you an experienced outside perspective and help you gain insight into yourself so you can make better choices.
- **Therapy is for crazy people.** Therapy is for people who have enough self-awareness to realize they need a helping hand and want to learn tools and techniques to become more self-confident and emotionally balanced.
- **All therapists want to talk about is my parents.** While exploring family relationships can sometimes clarify thoughts and behaviours later in life, that

is not the sole focus of therapy. The primary focus is what you need to change unhealthy patterns and symptoms in your life. Therapy is not about blaming your parents or dwelling on the past.

- **Therapy is self-indulgent.** It's for whiners and complainers. Therapy is hard work. Complaining won't get you very far. Improvement in therapy comes from taking a hard look at yourself and your life and taking responsibility for your own actions. Your therapist will help you, but ultimately, you're the one who must do the work.

Finding the Right Therapist for You

Finding the right therapist will probably take some time and work, but it's worth the effort. The connection you have with your therapist is essential. You need someone who you can trust - someone you feel comfortable talking to about difficult subjects and intimate secrets, someone who will be a partner in your recovery. Therapy won't be effective unless you have this bond, so, take some time at the beginning to find the right person. It's okay to shop around and to ask questions when interviewing potential therapists.

- **Experience matters.** One of the main reasons for seeing a therapist, rather than simply talking to a friend, is experience. Look for a therapist who is experienced in treating the problems that you have. Often, therapists have special areas of focus, such as depression or eating disorders. Experienced therapists have seen the problems you're facing again and again, which broadens their view and gives them more insight.
- **Learn about different treatment orientations.** Many therapists do a blend of orientations. However, it's a good idea to learn about the different treatment types, because that can affect your therapist's way of relating and suggested length of treatment.
- **Check licensing.** Credentials aren't everything, but if you're paying for a licensed professional, make sure the therapist holds a current license and is in good standing with the regulatory board.
- **Trust your gut.** Even if your therapist looks great on paper, if the connection doesn't feel right - if you don't trust the person or feel like they truly care - go with another choice. A good therapist will respect this choice and should never pressure you or make you feel guilty.

Questions to Ask Yourself When Choosing a Therapist

What's most important in a therapist or counsellor is a sense of connection, safety, and support. Ask yourself the following questions:

- Does it seem like the therapist truly cares about you and your problems?
- Do you feel as if the therapist understands you?
- Does the therapist accept you for who you are?
- Would you feel comfortable revealing personal information to this individual?
- Do you feel as if you can be honest and open with this therapist? That you don't have to hide or pretend you're someone that you're not?
- Is the therapist a good listener? Does he or she listen without interrupting, criticizing, or judging? Pick up on your feelings and what you're really saying? Make you feel heard?

Types of Therapy & Therapists

There are so many types of therapies and therapists; it might feel a little overwhelming to get started. Just remember that no one type of therapy is best, any more than any style of car is best. It all depends on your individual preferences and needs.

It is true that certain techniques are more useful than others in dealing with specific types of problems (phobias, for example). But in general, research about the "best" type of therapy always reaches the same conclusion: the philosophy behind the therapy is much less important than the relationship between you and your therapist.

If you feel comfortable and trusting in that relationship, the model of therapy, like your car, is just the vehicle that will help you move ahead to lead a more fulfilling life, regardless of the circumstances that brought you to therapy.

What to Expect in Therapy or Counselling

Every therapist is different, but there are usually some similarities to how therapy is structured. Normally, sessions will last about an hour, and often be about once a week, although for more intensive therapy they maybe more often. Therapy is normally conducted in the therapist's office, but therapists also work in hospitals and nursing homes, and in some cases, will do home visits.

- **Expect a good fit between you and your therapist.** Don't settle for bad fit. You may need to see one or more therapists until you experience feeling understood and accepted.
- **Therapy is a partnership.** Both you and your therapist contribute to the healing process. You're not expected to do the work of recovery all by yourself, but your therapist can't do it for you either. Therapy should feel like a collaboration.

- Therapy will not always feel pleasant. Painful memories, frustrations or feelings might surface. This is a normal part of therapy and your therapist will guide you through this process. Be sure to communicate with your therapist about how you are feeling.
- Therapy should be a safe place. While there will be times when you'll feel challenged or when you're facing unpleasant feelings, you should always feel safe. If you're starting to feel overwhelmed or you're dreading your therapy sessions, talk to your therapist.

Your First Therapy Session

The first session or two of therapy is a time for mutual connection, a time for the therapist to learn about you and your issues. The therapist may ask for a mental and physical health history.

It's also a good idea to talk to the therapist about what you hope to achieve in therapy. Together, you can set goals and benchmarks that you can use to measure your progress along the way.

This is also an important time for you to be evaluating your connection with your therapist. Do you feel like your therapist cares about your situation, and is invested in your recovery? Do you feel comfortable asking questions and sharing sensitive information? Remember, your feelings as well as your thoughts are important, so if you are feeling uncomfortable, don't hesitate to consider another therapist.

How Long Does Therapy Last?

Everyone's treatment is different. How long therapy lasts depends on many factors. You may have complicated issues, or a relatively straightforward problem that you want to address. Some therapy treatment types are short term, while others may be longer. Practically, you might also be limited by your insurance coverage.

However, discussing the length of therapy is important to bring up with your therapist at the beginning. This will give you an idea of starting goals to work towards and what you want to accomplish. Don't be afraid to revisit this issue at any time as therapy progresses, as goals often are modified or changed during treatment.

Making the Most of Therapy & Counselling

To make the most of therapy, you need to put what you're learning in your sessions into practice in your real life. 50 minutes in therapy each week isn't going to fix you; it's how you use what you've learned with the rest of your time. Here are some tips for getting the most out of your therapy:

- Make healthy lifestyle changes. There are many things you can do in your daily life to support your mood and improve your emotional health. Reach out to others for support. Get plenty of exercise and sleep. Eat well. Make time for relaxation and play. The list goes on...
- Don't expect the therapist to tell you what to do. You and your therapists are partners in your recovery. Your therapist can help guide you and make suggestions for treatment, but only you can make the changes you need to move forward.
- Make a commitment to your treatment. Don't skip sessions unless you absolutely have to. If your therapist gives you homework in between sessions, be sure to do it. If you find yourself skipping sessions or are reluctant to go, ask yourself why. Are you avoiding painful discussion? Did last session touch a nerve? Talk about your reluctance with your therapist.
- Share what you are feeling. You will get the most out of therapy if you are open and honest with your therapist about your feelings. If you feel embarrassed or ashamed, or something is too painful to talk about, don't be afraid to tell your therapist. Slowly, you can work together to get at the issues.

Is Therapy Working?

You should be able to tell within a session or two whether you and your therapist are a good fit. But sometimes, you may like your therapist but feel like you aren't making progress. It's important to evaluate your progress to make sure you're getting what you need from therapy.

A word of caution: There is no smooth, fast road to recovery. It's a process that's full of twists, turns, and the occasional backtrack. Sometimes, what originally seemed like a straightforward problem turns into a more complicated issue. Be patient and don't get discouraged over temporary setbacks. It's not easy to break old, entrenched patterns.

Remember that growth is difficult, and you won't be a new person overnight. But you should notice positive changes in your life. Your overall mood might be improving, for example. You may feel more connected to family and friends. Or a crisis that might have overwhelmed you in the past doesn't throw you as much this time.

Tips for evaluating your progress in therapy:

- Is your life changing for the better? Look at different parts of your life: work, home, your social life.
- Are you meeting the goals you and your therapist have set?
- Is therapy challenging you? Is it stretching you beyond your comfort zone?

- Do you feel like you're starting to understand yourself better?
- Do you feel more confident and empowered?
- Are your relationships improving?

Your therapist should work with you, reevaluating your goals and progress as necessary. However, remember that therapy isn't a competition. You are not a failure if you don't meet your goals in the number of sessions you originally planned. Focus instead on overall progress and what you've learned along the way.

When to Stop Therapy or Counselling

When to stop therapy depends on you and your individual situation. Ideally, you will stop therapy when you and your therapist have decided that you have met your goals. However, you may feel at some point that you have got what you need out of therapy, even if your therapist feels differently.

Leaving therapy can be difficult. Remember that the therapeutic relationship is a strong bond, and ending this relationship is a loss – even if treatment has been successful. Talk about this with your therapist. These feelings are normal. It's not uncommon for people to go back briefly to a therapist from time to time as needs arise.

As Long as You Continue to Progress in Therapy, It's an Option

Some people continue to go to therapy on an ongoing basis. That's okay, especially if you don't have other people to turn to for support in your life. Ideally, your therapist will be able to help you develop outside sources of support, but that's not always possible. If therapy meets an important need in your life and the expense is not an issue, continuing indefinitely is a legitimate choice.

Susan Kriegler
Ph.D(Psig.) D.Ed.

181 Beckett Street
Arcadia
Pretoria
0083

+27(0)60 621 5398
reception.smk@yebo.co.za
www.susankriegler.com
www.Facebook.com/DrSusanKriegler

Dr Susan Kriegler is a highly renowned psychologist from Pretoria, South Africa. She consults from her practice as well as online to clients in more than 7 countries. To schedule an appointment, or for more reading material as well as Audio & Video downloads, please visit www.susankriegler.com.

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