

Introduction

This book aims to provide practical information about managing bipolar disorder for people with bipolar disorder and those close to them—their partners, close relatives and friends. The idea of writing a book came from people with bipolar disorder in our treatment programs, who requested more information about their illness and its treatment. They wanted information that combined the latest research with practical, hands-on suggestions relevant to their daily lives. This information was requested not only for themselves, but also for the people important to them, to help them understand and find ways of dealing with bipolar disorder. The information we present here comes from current research findings, our clinical experience and from those people with bipolar disorder who have taught us so much about helpful strategies for living with their illness.

Bipolar disorder, previously referred to as manic depression, is about mood swings, but they are no ordinary mood swings. If you have bipolar disorder, you will know that rather than simply experiencing the usual ups and downs of everyday life, you can

experience extreme highs and lows that seem to take on a life of their own independent of events around you. You may experience different degrees of these mood states, ranging from hardly noticeable to very severe at different times. You may also have some aspects of high mood combined with low mood at the same time.

These mood swings are *not* character flaws. They result from biological changes in areas of the brain that control mood. These biological changes respond to medication, and bipolar disorder is considered to be an illness. The illness does not end when your extreme mood subsides—rather, it is a recurrent illness that may be compared to asthma. People with asthma experience recurrent attacks, and different degrees of wellness between attacks. The thing about the ‘attacks’ in bipolar disorder is that they are so personal. They bring about changes in how you feel, both physically and emotionally, in what you think and what you do. Some of these changes can have serious consequences for your safety, and affect your finances, your career and relationships. Fortunately, there *are* effective treatments and personal strategies for managing episodes and preventing relapse.

We include information about bipolar disorder, its causes and triggers, treatment options and ways of preventing relapse, minimising possible negative consequences and dealing with the impact of the illness on your life. Everyone finds some way of coping with their illness, but not all strategies are constructive. This book points out some of the common pitfalls that can be unhelpful or make your illness worse, as well as strategies that help. In addition, we try to address some of the questions we have encountered from patients and their families over the years. We examine ways of keeping an eye on your bipolar disorder, implementing healthy lifestyle choices and drawing up your own relapse prevention plans. You can combine this information with your personal experience and discover new ideas for managing your illness, or confirm your own successful strategies.

INTRODUCTION

The strategies for managing bipolar disorder mentioned here are not intended to replace your medical or psychological treatment. They aim to assist you to be informed, get the best from your treatment and augment it with your own personal strategies.

Finding personal strategies for managing your illness has been termed 'self-management' (Russell, 2005). Sarah Russell, an author and researcher who also has bipolar disorder, explains how misleading this term can be, as it can seem to indicate that people do it all on their own. What self-management of bipolar disorder really means is using the resources available to you for managing your illness wisely. Your bipolar disorder often affects those close to you, some of whom might have little understanding of the illness, or of how they could help. Here we provide information to assist those who care about you in dealing with bipolar disorder. We discuss ways of involving trusted others in the management of your illness, and of enhancing your relationship with your clinician. Bipolar disorder is potentially a very isolating and challenging illness, and having allies in your battle to manage it is a distinct advantage. Enjoying good relationships is part of the richness of life, and we emphasise the importance of finding people you can relate to and of maintaining good relationships.

Living with bipolar disorder also involves adapting to the changes the illness brings to your life. We have found that people who live well with their bipolar disorder combine living a healthy lifestyle with constructive plans for managing the different phases of their illness.

Bipolar disorder is an illness that can affect your life and who you are to the point that the boundary between you and the illness blurs. There may be times when you are so ill that all your energy is devoted to battling your illness and simply surviving. When you are well you may still need to take prescribed medications and keep an eye on your disorder, or attend to a few mild persistent

symptoms, but it is easier to devote more attention to the things in life that matter to you, your own goals and interests. Many people report that the illness never leaves them, but it can become a smaller and smaller part of whom they are. Being well provides the opportunity to rebuild your life and yourself. We examine ways of keeping well and enriching life.

The suffering and negative consequences experienced at times as a result of the illness must not be underplayed. At the same time, having bipolar disorder has been connected with creativity, achievement and fame. People like the artist Vincent Van Gogh, composer Robert Schumann and author Virginia Woolf all had bipolar disorder. Bipolar disorder is quite common and affects the lives of many ordinary people. Over one in every hundred people has the diagnosis of bipolar disorder and you can add another two to four people in a hundred if you consider its milder forms as well. The disorder affects women and men equally, as it does people in different countries and from different socioeconomic levels. Despite its prevalence, however, bipolar disorder is not yet completely understood. An added burden for people with bipolar disorder is that unlike illnesses such as asthma, bipolar disorder carries the stigma of ‘mental illness’, which makes it harder for many people to accept. We discuss ways of coming to terms with your illness and living beyond the confines of stigma.

It can take time to develop a fulfilling lifestyle that helps you keep well. There may still be times when your symptoms break through and you need to use your personal strategies for preventing or minimising relapse. It helps to be prepared. This book aims to demystify the illness, enhance understanding and acceptance and provide practical options for your own strategies. We see managing your bipolar disorder as part of the larger journey of living your life, and hope that this book provides you with ideas and inspiration along the way.