

# Coping with Bipolar Disorder

While mood stabilizers like lithium, depakote and carbamazepine are first order treatments of bipolar disorder, there are many things you can do to help medications work better. Become an expert on your illness. Since bipolar disorder is a lifetime condition (like many other medical disorders such as diabetes), it is essential that you and your family or others close to you learn all about it and its treatment. Read books, attend lectures, talk to your doctor or therapist, and consider joining a chapter of the Depressive and Manic-Depressive Association or the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill near you to stay up to date and learn from others how to manage day-to-day life and your medications. Becoming informed is the surest path to success.

You can help reduce the minor mood swings and stresses that sometimes lead to more severe episodes by paying attention to the following:

- **Maintain a stable sleep pattern.** Go to bed around the same time each night and get up about the same time each morning. Disrupted sleep patterns appear to cause chemical changes in your body that can trigger mood episodes. If you have trouble sleeping, or are sleeping too much, be sure to tell your doctor. If you have to take a trip where you will change time zones and might have jet lag, get advice from your doctor.
- **Maintain a regular pattern of activity.** Don't be frenetic or drive yourself impossibly hard. Think about what level of stress and activity works best for you in both the short-term and over the long run.
- **Do not use alcohol or illicit drugs.** These chemicals cause an imbalance in how the brain works. This can, and often does, trigger mood episodes and interferes with your medications. You may sometimes find it tempting to use alcohol or illicit drugs to "treat" your own mood or sleep problems-but this almost always makes matters worse. If you have a problem with substances, ask your doctor for help and consider self-help groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous.
- **Be very careful about "everyday" use** of small amounts of alcohol, caffeine, and some over-the-counter medications for colds, allergies, or pain. Even small amounts of these substances can interfere with sleep, mood, or your medicine. It may not seem fair that you have to deprive yourself of a cocktail before dinner or morning cup of coffee, but for many people this can be the "straw that breaks the camel's back."
- **Support from family and friends can help a lot.** However, you should also realize that it is not always easy to live with someone who has mood swings. If each of you learns as much as possible about bipolar disorder, you will be better able to help reduce the inevitable stress and mutual criticisms that the disorder can cause. Even the calmest family will sometimes need outside help in dealing with the stress of a loved one who has continuing symptoms. Ask your doctor or therapist for resources to educate both you and your family about bipolar disorder. Family therapy or a support group can be very helpful.
- **Try to reduce stress at work.** Of course, you want to do your very best at work, but always remember that avoiding relapses is your most important job and in the long run can increase your overall productivity and strengthen your relationships. Try to keep predictable hours that allow you to get to sleep at a reasonable time. If mood symptoms interfere with your ability to work, discuss with your doctor whether you should "tough it out" or take time off. How open you are with employers and coworkers is ultimately up to you. If you are unable to work, you might have a family member tell your employer that you are not feeling well and that you are under a doctor's care and will return to work as soon as possible.

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