

Living with Bipolar

■ by Kim Pronoitis, MA, LCPC



Depression presents itself in many different ways. Bipolar depression is different than unipolar depression as one experiences high highs and low lows. Like many mental health issues, bipolar is on a spectrum with some being more severe than others. Bipolar is a lifelong disorder, however, when treated correctly and educating about the illness, one can lead a productive successful healthy life. Bipolar is sometimes hard to detect as some highs are not total manic highs and some lows can present themselves as a unipolar depression would – it is best to consult a licensed mental health professional.

The Importance of Education and a Strong Support System

Living with someone who struggles with bipolar disorder can be challenging. When the illness goes undiagnosed, loved ones describe the person as difficult to get along with. It is extremely beneficial for family members to educate themselves and have an understanding of the disorder. It is also vital to have a good support system and support groups serve families and their loved one well in this area. It is one thing to have a basic understanding of the illness, but another to grasp the conceptual understanding of living with a struggling family member. This is why I encourage establishing a good support system in addition to education for family members and loved ones. Of the people who suffer with bipolar illness, the ones leading the most successful lives are compliant with their medication, have a good support system and attend counseling and/or groups.

Bipolar is Something a Person HAS, Not Who They ARE

One key point to understanding bipolar is to understand the person themselves. First, remember they are people who struggle - often times, I like to tell my clients that they need not see themselves as a bipolar person, but a person who struggles with an illness. This allows people who struggle with the diagnosis to become aware that they are still human, and having human emotions aside from the bipolar falls within the healthy norm. People with bipolar disorder want to be treated as others would like to be treated.

Jesus Call to Care for the Sick and Suffering

People with mental illness need support not only from friends and family, but from society as well. Society needs to stop stigmatizing mental illness, or hold prejudice against those who suffer. Our mental health, like our physical health, needs to be taken care of – it is part of personal care. Support is vital to the success of dealing with any ailment - cancer, diabetes, brain damage, physical handicaps, including mental illness. The stigma that our society places on those who struggle with mental health issues can cause fear of judgement and delays in seeking treatment. Television, movies, and the media have portrayed

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mental illness as something to fear. We need to change this portrayal so that people do not continue to suffer in silence and are not afraid to seek help. As Christians we are called to care for the sick and suffering. People with bipolar disorder are sick and suffering and need to be treated like anyone else with a debilitating illness.

You Are Not Alone - REACH OUT

It is not uncommon for those who struggle to self-medicate and engage in maladaptive coping skills. It is estimated that about half of those who struggle with bipolar disorder also struggle with addiction, which always complicates the issue. It is more beneficial to reach for help from a mental health professional or a support system.



In therapy I often reiterate that you can't change what you don't acknowledge. As if it serves some sort of healthy purpose, many prefer to live in denial. Going untreated can ruin lives and relationships. Our mental health and physical health are one body. Like any other part of our physical body our brain is part of our health. Just as someone with high blood pressure or diabetes needs medication to balance the chemistry in certain parts of the body, medication is needed to make sure the chemistry in our brain is in balance.

As a therapist, I encourage you not to put your mental health on the back burner. There is no need to be fearful of your mind, or mental health. Do not be afraid to reach out for help

and remember the FEAR acronym (F- false, E-evidence, A-appearing, R-real.) Reach out for yourselves; reach out for your loved ones. You are NOT alone! In Psalm 34:4 David talks about being delivered from fear, "I sought the Lord, and he answered me; he delivered me from all my fears." ■

When I am afraid, I put my trust in you. Psalm 56:3

When I said, "My foot is slipping," your unfailing love, Lord, supported me. Psalm 94:18

So we say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid..." Hebrews 13:6



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