

POINTS TO PONDER

Help from parents, partners, and pals



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By Stephen Propst

For those of us who have bipolar disorder, we are kidding ourselves if we think we can go it alone. While one of the most profound determinants of making a positive recovery is having support from family and friends, supporting someone with a chronic illness is not easy. When family and friends understand how things are for those of us with bipolar, it helps move us along the road to recovery and helps us all live more harmoniously.

For those who support us, there are ways to reduce stress, improve relationships, and make for a better overall quality of life for everyone. Whether the person has been diagnosed as having bipolar and is compliant, or refuses to admit that anything is even wrong, having the right attitude and the necessary basic knowledge is key. Here are 10 points to keep in mind if you're serious about offering support that helps, not hinders.

1. Never give up hope

Looking back, the first 10 years of my more than two decades of dealing with bipolar disorder were a seemingly

insurmountable struggle, but my loved ones never gave up hope. Despite a situation that often created frustration and hopelessness, they never doubted my recovery. Today, they continue to instill that same undying confidence.

There is one piece of advice for anyone who loves someone with bipolar disorder, and it is this: keep the faith and never give up. There have been many times when there was nothing but hope, and you have living proof that it kept me going. So, let your hope for a loved one spread—it's contagious.

2. Take some time

Time is one of the hardest concepts to convey to people. We all want immediate results, but with bipolar disorder, so-called overnight success can, in fact, extend to years. Studies show that it can take 10 years or more to even obtain an accurate diagnosis (*Living with Bipolar Disorder: How Far Have We Really Come?* Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance [DBSA] Constituency Survey, 2001). In my own case, it took eight years before someone accurately put a name to my struggle.

With bipolar disorder, there are simply no quick fixes. Thinking there is a miracle cure only makes matters worse, so instead, help your loved one set realistic goals. The road to recovery is not a straight shot; it's a winding path with delays, downtimes, and detours. Remember progress can be made, but it takes time. Let patience be your guide.

3. Face the facts

Be willing to acknowledge that bipolar disorder is a legitimate, organic disorder. Saying something like, "It's all in your head," or "Just snap out of it," denies that reality. As with diabetes or cancer, bipolar disorder requires medical treatment and management. And as with other chronic conditions, bipolar disorder is initially unfamiliar and frequently unpredictable. It can be gut-wrenching and at times, scary.

It also helps to face the facts when it comes to our current mental health system. If you find it to be disorganized and disconnected, imagine what the patient is experiencing. With your support, a patient can be guided through the maze, find the best care, and stick to a workable treatment plan.

4. Adopt the right attitude

How you see things does matter. With the amount of stigma and discrimination that exist in society at large, the last thing a patient needs is misguided thinking coming from family and friends. More support is needed, not more shame. The more your response is based on reality and not on myths, the more your support can make a difference.

All too often, family members make a loved one feel as though it isn't bipolar but rather a character flaw or something brought on by the person. Some even view an occasional setback as though it spells permanent doom. Such flawed thinking may be common, but it's harmful to the person facing bipolar disorder who needs constructive feedback, not destructive rhetoric.

5. Get educated

People who have bipolar disorder often deny that anything's wrong, and frequently, they don't stay on their medications. It's important to learn about these and other nuances of the disorder. Fortunately, there are many resources available today, especially compared to 25 years ago, not the least of which is the Internet.

A national clothing store uses the slogan: "An educated consumer is our best customer." To support your loved one, consider adopting a similar notion. An educated family member or friend is our best advocate and our greatest source of support.

6. Treat us like adults

A psychiatrist once commented that my body (at the time) was 30-years-old physically, but I was 45 intellectually, and 15 emotionally. Talk about a tough pill to swallow! Bipolar disorder can arrest a person's emotional maturity and produce behavior that appears very adolescent and reckless.

Please remember, however, that while someone who has bipolar may act like a child, there is an adult underneath. The world of the person who has bipolar disorder can be full of chaos and confusion, and low self-esteem is common. It can make a big difference when you continue to acknowledge and show respect for the

grown human being who is struggling behind all the symptoms.

7. Give us some space

Living with a serious illness is a daunting task. It can be a foreign concept to separate yourself from someone you want to help. But as a support person, it is best to establish a loving distance between yourself and the person who has bipolar.

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Set boundaries and establish consequences that encourage those who have bipolar to seek recovery on their own, all the while expressing your concern and willingness to help. Be supportive, patient, and understanding—without being used. Effective encouragement is helpful; enabling is not.

8. Forget the past

Frustration often accompanies bipolar disorder. Family and friends can spend countless hours—if not years—wondering what went wrong. Avoid making matters worse by wallowing in the past.

Pointing fingers solves nothing, blaming is not the answer, and getting angry only makes matters worse. Bitterness and resentment can sometimes act as a trigger and incite more of the behavior you want to stop. Instead, focus on helping make tomorrow better. That's true support.

9. Take care of yourself

The family suffers right along with the person who has bipolar disorder, so, it's

important for you to develop your own coping skills. Only if you take care of yourself can you help. All too often caregivers end up becoming ill.

During training, emergency medical technicians are taught to never put their lives in obvious jeopardy to save someone else's. If they did so, they'd be unable to help anyone. Likewise the same is true for you while you are caring for your loved one. Remember that you have yourself—and probably others—to care for as well.

10. Find a healthy balance

There are so many questions: "How much should I be willing to do?" "Should we use tough love?" "How long does this go on?" "How long should we wait before we intervene?" and on and on and on. Bipolar disorder is tough. It's like walking a tightrope sometimes, where you've got to learn to balance your own welfare with the interest you have in supporting the person with bipolar.

You also have to find a healthy balance when it comes to the support you offer. Learn to take things in stride, one day at a time. There's a time to help and a time to step back; a time to speak and a time to listen; a time to be patient and a time to be insistent.

Now, you have some valuable points to ponder as you help your loved one pursue recovery. The more you're in the know, the better equipped you are to offer the type of support that can make a positive difference. The reward is a brighter, happier future—for everyone involved.

I know it's worth the effort. ●

Stephen Propst has bipolar disorder and uses many of the concepts he writes about to maintain his recovery. He serves as a DBSA (Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance) Board Member; is a conference speaker and a coach/consultant about conditions such as bipolar disorder. He can be reached at talktosteve@joimail.com

