

## Helping a Loved One with Bipolar Disorder: Key Principles

When you love a person with bipolar disorder and want to support him or her, you will get a lot of suggestions from a lot of sources, some of which are more reliable than others. This article presents advice you can count on: seven ways to help a loved one with bipolar while retaining your own composure. These ideas have evolved from medical research and practice, along with personal stories and experience, and they can be powerful tools. Many of the suggestions are based on the few common principles covered here. With these in mind, you can begin to develop your own personal toolkit tailor-made for you and your loved one's needs.

- \* **Don't take it personally.** This principle is one of the hardest to put into action. Bipolar disorder symptoms include many behaviors that hurt your loved one and the people around him or her. It can seem clear to you that your loved one isn't trying hard enough or is just trying to make things difficult. Don't give in to those thoughts. Blame the illness, not the person. What gets said or done to you isn't about you; it's about your loved one's distress and disrupted nervous system.
- \* **Accept that you can't control your loved one or the illness.** Your support is most effective when you let go of any ideas that you can force your loved one to do the things you think he or she needs to do. Empathizing rather than shaming, observing rather than criticizing, expressing feelings rather than demands, and trying to collaborate instead of control are some of the strategies that grow out of this principle.
- \* **Keep cool.** Bipolar disorder generates a lot of heat and high emotions. Responding with your own high emotions feeds the fire. Following this principle means figuring out how to refrain from yelling and screaming and how to walk away (disengage) from an interaction when necessary. You may want to explore ways to help you do this, such as mindfulness practices or regular exercise. Your lower tone can make a big difference for your loved one.
- \* **Engage in discussion to create solutions.** Effective communication is at the heart of helping your loved one. Listening attentively more than talking is one of your best tools in following this principle. Asking questions and really focusing on the answers opens up dialogue. Thoughts and feelings expressed clearly and compassionately are much more likely to yield positive outcomes than are blanket pronouncements and rambling lectures.
- \* **Avoid the four big communication no-nos.** Criticism, blame, judgment, and demand are likely to drive a wedge between you and your loved one. Work as a team to solve problems and address issues in ways that serve everyone's interests.

\* **Put safety first.** Bipolar disorder can cause symptoms that are dangerous or even deadly. Being ready and able to call for help for your loved one is critical for everyone's safety and wellbeing. Your loved one may be unhappy, even angry, when you take action, but you can sort that out when they're feeling better. Planning ahead for crises — anticipating them, understanding that the risks are real, and being prepared to take action when needed — are strategies born out of this principle.

\* **Take care of yourself.** You're in a better position to help others when you're physically and emotionally well. Discover how to leave a situation if you anticipate or observe danger. Care for your own health by paying attention to sleep, nutrition, and exercise, for example. This principle can feel hard to practice when you're exhausted by managing day-to-day crises, but caring for yourself alleviates the exhaustion and helps you maintain your role as a patient and effective caregiver.