

## **Tips for Families of People with Bipolar Disorder**

Developed in collaboration with the mental health centers of NBHP and FBHP and the Client and Family Advisory Board

- 1. Participate in treatment and learn** about bipolar disorder. Knowledge helps you support your loved one in managing symptoms, working towards recovery, and handling setbacks. It's not uncommon to feel confused or upset by this disorder and the behaviors you are seeing in your loved one. Education can lead to more understanding and empathy by learning about symptoms and cycles. Check with the provider about education for families.
- 2. Support treatment.** Seeking help when symptoms first become noticeable can improve recovery. Empower your family member by working with them and encouraging them to have a voice in treatment decisions. Ask if they would like you to attend with them for support.
- 3. Encourage consistent use of medication.** Taking medication regularly can reduce relapses. Take side effects seriously as this causes many people to stop their medications. Be aware that people with bipolar disorder tend to stop taking their medications because they miss the feeling of mania. Going on and off medications can decrease the effectiveness. Encourage your loved one to talk to their prescriber about side effects to increase the chances of finding the right medication. Assist in tracking side effects and improvements for prescriber visits.
- 4. Be aware of signs of relapse.** The disorder may come and go, with times of improvement and worsening, regardless of your hopes or actions. You may notice changes in symptoms before your loved ones and can help them to be more aware. When your loved one is doing well and having fewer symptoms, it is a good time to agree on a plan for what to do if you notice warning signs of both depression and mania, so you know how and when to intervene.
- 5. Don't be afraid to ask loved ones if they are having thoughts of hurting themselves.** Take action if your loved one's safety is in question. The act of asking someone about suicide is not dangerous and will not put the idea in their head.
- 6. Create a calm and safe environment.** Stress, which can result from positive or negative experiences, can increase symptoms. You can help by providing, or helping them maintain, a structured and supportive environment.
- 7. Take care of yourself.** It is common for family members to feel burned out by loved ones with bipolar disorder. It is easier to support others when you are supported. Join a support group, and make time for yourself to do things you enjoy. Recognize your limits and don't be afraid to ask for help. Let others take the lead in caretaking at times. Avoid self-blame. You can have a positive impact on recovery, but you aren't to blame for the illness or responsible for your loved one's recovery.
- 8. Acceptance of the disorder and patience** will help your loved one, as well as family and friends, deal with the challenges while still enjoying life. Symptoms change over time, but the underlying disorder remains. Recognize that recovery is a process; set realistic expectations and help your loved one set doable goals.
- 9. Try to be hopeful.** With therapy, medication and support, people with bipolar disorder recover and live full and productive lives. Don't forget to find ways to have fun and enjoy time together.

## Resources for Clients and Families

### Education

- National Institute of Mental Health (1.800.421.4211 or [www.nimh.nih.gov](http://www.nimh.nih.gov) or <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/bipolar-disorder/index.shtml>)
- National Alliance on Mental Illness (<http://www.nami.org>)
- <https://www.achievesolutions.net/achievesolutions/en//Home.do>

### Self help

- Jones, S. H., Hayward, P. & Lam, D. H. (2003). *Coping with Bipolar Disorder* (Second Edition). Oxford: Oneworld.
- Miklowitz, D. J. (2002). *The Bipolar Disorder Survival Guide: What You and Your Family Need to Know*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Ramirez Basco, M. (2006). *The Bipolar Workbook: Tools for Controlling Your Mood Swings*, New York: Guilford Press.
- Scott, J. (2001). *Overcoming Mood Swings*. London: Constable Robinson.

### Memoirs

- Jamison, K.R. (1995). *An unquiet mind: A memoir of moods and madness*
- Manning, Martha (1994). *Undercurrents: A life beneath the surface*