

FOCUS On Mania:

For many people living with Bipolar Disorder, the black dog yapping at their heels often morphs into a gregarious, colourful and excited toucan capable of flying high, fast and free. For those who experience the roller-coaster ride associated with this illness, life becomes a balancing act between avoiding the vicious snap of the dog's teeth, and not flying too high and untethered with the exotic toucan. Strategies are often discussed for managing the dark abyss of depression, but sometimes the soaring manic heights get overlooked. This piece looks at methods for managing the elevated moods that can accompany Bipolar Disorder.

One needs to approach the manic swings with a desire to **FOCUS** on managing the illness and minimising the negative impacts upon day-to-day living. The **FOCUS** philosophy offers strategies for managing mood elevation by addressing key issues that are highly relevant to the person living with Bipolar Disorder.

Family and friends are crucial strategic tools in managing manic highs. Bipolar Disorder does not affect people in isolation, but it also affects those closest to them. By having open, honest and effective relationships and communication with significant others, the person living with Bipolar Disorder does not have to cope with manic episodes on their own. Family and friends, being one step removed from the illness, may be more objective at seeing trigger elements or slight changes in mood that may possibly indicate the onset of a manic episode. This may allow the person with Bipolar Disorder to take effective steps to head off a full-scale manic episode before they are even aware it is encroaching. It can be lonely when one tries to carry the burden of mental illness alone. Even if family cannot experience what you are going through, they can be a source of support and strength. This is not the time to stand proud and alone in silence. When one lives with chronic illness, silence is NOT golden. Family and friends can be an important lifeline when you are unable to cope with a manic episode in your life. However, they need permission to be supportive of you through channels of honest dialogue.

Owning your illness is also a positive step to managing the highs that are associated with Bipolar Disorder. This means to actively and openly acknowledge oneself as a person living with Bipolar Disorder. When we fail to admit we have an illness or a problem in life, we often close ourselves off to help from both professionals and others closer to us. It is difficult to access services, and ask for help, when we are unwilling to speak the truth about our lives and who we are. Often accepting that one has a mental illness or mood disorder requires some time. However, coming to terms with, and owning your illness, allows you to move forward and accept the multitude of resources available. Do not be ashamed to talk to appropriate others about your condition. Having a Bipolar Disorder is not a flaw in your character, but rather a medical condition that can be effectively treated.

Crisis planning is a necessary part of living with, coping with, and managing the elevated side of Bipolar Disorder. Planning for a crisis will ultimately help you get through it as smoothly as possible should the situation arise. Planning should take place when you are at a stable time in your illness. Waiting for the manic episode before you act may see you seduced by the exhilaration of the high because you now feel *on top of the world*. Thus, many people are unable, or unwilling, to seek assistance when the crisis emerges.

Create a crisis plan folder that can be accessed by those persons who may need to use it in times of emergency such as family and friends, your general practitioner, your treating specialist and other relevant people whom you trust. A crisis plan may contain any or all of the following information:

- The names and contact numbers of your general practitioner, psychiatrist, social worker or case manager, and any other professionals involved in your ongoing care.
- A crisis alert list that contains the names and contact details of people you trust (close family or nearby friends) who are willing and able to help in an emergency.
- A list of early warning signs that may indicate the onset of a manic episode. Such a list will help others to recognise when you may be in need of assistance.
- A comprehensive list of your current medications, including generic name, dose and how often you take each. You should also include a list of any medications or foods that you are allergic to.

<http://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/media/writingcomp/index.cfm>

- A list of your health fund details, including Medicare numbers, private health insurance contact details and concession cards.
- Instructions for the care of your home, plants, pets, collection of mail and the like in case you are admitted to a care facility for any reason.
- A list of contact details for next of kin and employers in case these people need to be contacted in an emergency or if you have an extended stay in supported care facilities.

Understanding your mood disorder is a strategic step in managing your illness, remaining well, and avoiding the extremes of mood elevation. One of your most useful tools for dealing with mania will be your learning about it. This includes as much medical knowledge as you can tolerate so that you will easily recognise signs and symptoms of mania, and how best to avoid situations that predispose you to it. Learning about your illness will make it much less confronting. Fear and uncertainty are often associated with a lack of knowledge. When you understand and recognise what is happening within your body, you gain the tools to manage it effectively, rather than allowing it to manage you.

Educating yourself about the manic side of Bipolar Disorder also means gathering information about living with mood disorders. The medical information is insufficient on its own without advice on how best to live day-by-day with Bipolar Disorder. One must learn skills about how to co-exist with Bipolar Disorder as part of their life, as opposed to Bipolar Disorder *being* their life. This may include information on many of the following topics:

- The importance of an adequate diet. Also, consideration of any dietary restrictions that certain medications may impose.
- The benefits of sufficient exercise, rest, sleep and time out.
- Triggers that may precipitate a manic episode.
- Responses you can take to defuse an elevated mood before it turns into a full-scale manic episode.
- How to chart your daily moods in order to flag early warning signs.
- The value of daily schedules and plans to moderate elevated behaviour. Such schedules can help to make one more resistant to cycle shifts.

Support systems and mental health organisations are an excellent way of educating yourself about Bipolar Disorder and its associated highs. Support systems can also help you realise that you are not alone. Despite the most loving support from family, and the best intentions of friends, only another person with Bipolar Disorder can truly comprehend the full impact of this illness on your life. A support group of peers and friends with the disorder can more personally relate to what you are going through in a way that no one else can. Bipolar Disorder is a chronic illness, and a supportive community is vitally important for anyone living with this. They can offer a sympathetic ear, practical advice, and solutions that they have found work in their own lives, as well as vital connections to people who will support you, but not judge you or your illness. For the times when you are not inclined to socialise, online networks, e-mail lists and chat rooms are an excellent way to get support.

When people with a Bipolar Disorder **FOCUS** on mania management, it will add significantly to the quality of their lives. It will decrease stress by minimising the chance of manic episodes, but also provide comfort in knowing that a crisis plan exists to cope with unexpected and uncontrolled upswings in mood. With these safeguards in place, a person living with Bipolar Disorder can maybe tap into the colourful palette of the toucan without fear of a total and uncontrollable elevation.

The creative rewards of this illness may then be reaped because fear has been removed, checks and balances put into place to prevent excessive highs, and support is available from as many sources as possible. Through these strategies heightened creativity may be enjoyed without the risk of mania taking hold. Thus the person with Bipolar Disorder can nurture their creative muse without the fear of elevated moods leading to an Icarus-like demise as they soar too close to the sun.