

## The Manic Face of Bipolar Disorder

“Never, never, never believe any war will be smooth and easy, or that anyone who embarks on the strange voyage can measure the tides and hurricanes he will encounter.”

Spoken by Sir Winston Churchill, these words marked Great Britain’s involvement in World War II. They can also be appropriately applied to another of Churchill’s challenges, his personal struggle with bipolar disorder. For today’s bipolar sufferers, managing the manic highs and depressive lows that define the illness is a never-ending battle. The bipolar spectrum ranges from severe depression to severe mania, which is characterised by intense mood and energy elevation. Bipolar sufferers cycle somewhere between these two extremes, often several times in a given year. Therefore, in order to successfully adapt to the disorder’s challenges, it is crucial that those affected by bipolar learn and develop effective strategies to control such severe emotional fluctuations.

Manic symptoms vary significantly from person to person; however, the majority of sufferers have consistently reported overriding feelings of irritability, impatience and excitability as predominant characteristics experienced during bouts of mania. Additional symptoms can include racing thoughts, increased confidence, poor judgment and risky behaviour. During a manic state, a bipolar sufferer may have reduced fear and little social inhibition, often resulting in impulsive behaviour. As good as this may sound, there are potential risks. For example, while at the peak of a manic ‘high,’ one bipolar sufferer reported engaging in an exorbitant spending spree, resulting in a 100,000 dollar credit card debt. Others have battled with insomnia, and in many cases, substance abuse. For the outside observer, the behaviour of a bipolar sufferer while experiencing a manic peak may appear questionable. Manic highs can become so intense that the sufferer may experience delusions of grandeur, believing they are vastly superior to those around them. This can have a detrimental effect on the sufferer’s relationships and lead to a false sense of accomplishment and success, which in turn could trigger and intensify the onset of a depressive state. Another danger of manic episodes is impaired judgment. Consequently, many sufferers suddenly stop taking their prescribed medications, believing they no longer need them. The consequences of this are severe, often leading to further complications with managing the disorder.

Despite the severity of manic symptoms, writers, artists, and musicians, among other creative talents, have frequently associated manic “highs” with ingenuity, passion and inspiration. In support of these claims, research has revealed a greater prevalence for bipolar disorder amongst creative professionals than the rest of the population. This line of inquiry suggests that mania and creativity share a positive relationship. Additional research has also shown that the majority of those diagnosed with bipolar are introverted. Thus, many sufferers have claimed to utilise periods of mania by following creative pursuits, such as writing poetry or producing artwork. Furthermore, the sudden rush of new thoughts and ideas commonly experienced during manic peaks, could be an advantage for bipolar sufferers in terms of creativity. In-depth case studies have shown that many creative artists, including writers and musicians, are not consistently productive, but instead create their most prolific work during periods of mania and hypomania, reporting that they feel “enthusiastic” and “inspired” during these times. The dramatic increase in confidence may also boost motivation, increase creativity and promote positive goal setting. However, although many prolific individuals have attributed their creative success to periods of mania, the personal price can drastically outweigh the benefits.

While some sufferers describe their periods of mania as mostly positive and productive experiences, others are more concerned with limiting collateral damage, and consequently try to abate, or weaken, their manic symptoms. By taking a strategic approach, that includes implementing and maintaining effective strategies, sufferers can learn to manage, and even utilise periods of mania. The vast majority of practitioners in the field of mental health assert that bipolar disorder cannot be successfully managed exclusively by medication. Consequently, a large volume of non-medical strategies have emerged and gained significant results.

As an initial approach to tackling bipolar disorder, sufferers should be proactive and educate themselves on their condition. This should include discussions with trained practitioners, and reading credible books and <http://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/media/writingcomp/index.cfm>

publications that provide information about the disorder.

“One ought never to turn one’s back on a threatened danger and try to run away from it. If you do that, you will double the danger. But if you meet it promptly and without flinching, you will reduce the danger by half.” (Winston Churchill)

Winston Churchill’s tenacity to stand up in the face of adversity illustrates the importance for bipolar sufferers to confront their condition. It is crucial that sufferers don’t shy away, or refuse to accept their diagnosis. They should feel assured that being diagnosed with bipolar disorder is nothing to be ashamed of. Like most illnesses, bipolar disorder affects people from all walks of life; it is free of prejudice and merciless in its execution. But that’s not to say it cannot be managed successfully.

The first major hurdle for bipolar sufferers is feeling comfortable enough to speak to others about their condition. By educating partners, close friends and family members, those diagnosed with bipolar can promote the growth of a supportive framework. Once made aware of the symptoms and effects of bipolar disorder, such individuals can be asked to identify potential triggers and warning signs that could mark a lapse into a manic (or depressive) state. The ability to recognise signs of polarising allows sufferers to avoid situations and behaviours that might trigger a full-blown episode, such as sleep deprivation, increased stress and anxiety, or the use of illicit substances or alcohol. In addition, trained friends or family members can also give the person regular reality checks about his or her behaviour, reinforce positive social behaviour, and provide constructive feedback about any behaviour that is out of the ordinary.

As well as relying on friends and family members, bipolar sufferers have found that keeping a daily diary to consistently record details of their condition has helped them to manage the disorder. Accurately tracking the onset of manic and depressive states can also assist medical practitioners in prescribing the most effective type and dosage of medication. It is also beneficial for bipolar sufferers who are looking to benefit from periods of mania, to compile a list of productive tasks and activities to engage in by themselves, while experiencing the effects of mania. However, for the majority of sufferers, committed to full-time jobs and families, it is simply not possible to drop all other responsibilities and focus on making the most of one’s manic ‘high’. Therefore, a more practical option is simply to use a diary to write down any ideas or sudden brainwaves that come to mind during a manic episode.

In the interest of weakening the effects of mania, some sufferers have reported that taking daily naps, afternoon siestas, or regular meditation, significantly reduces their manic symptoms. Although for many of us, it’s simply not possible to take a nap whenever the urge strikes, it is crucial for bipolar sufferers to avoid exhaustion and potential burnout as a result of overwork and stress. Routines have also been found to be effective for managing the adverse effects of mania. This essentially involves maintaining consistent times for sleeping, meals, and work. Sufferers should also determine how much time they need to themselves and incorporate that into their daily routine, while also scheduling social time, such as seeing friends on Saturday, and family on a Sunday. The idea is to try and strike a balance between avoiding feelings of isolation and depression, while not becoming overstimulated, or manic.

Because it is common for periods of mania to be accompanied by impulsive behaviour and poor judgment, a basic technique, where the sufferer makes a deliberate pause before committing an intended action, can radically reduce the opportunity for collateral damage. This method simply involves the person physically stopping for a number of seconds before they begin engaging in their planned action. This will help them to slow down enough to rethink things. Another method, comprising of basic relaxation techniques such as deep breathing and progressive muscle relaxation, can be used in daily life as a way of avoiding overstimulation and potential burnout.

Like the disorder’s symptoms, strategies for effectively managing bipolar disorder are vast and numerous. Different people will respond to different methods, so it’s important that sufferers find what individually works for them. Although at times it will seem like the odds are stacked up against them, bipolar sufferers should feel confident that their condition is manageable. Despite all odds, Winston Churchill led a country to victory, inspiring his people during their darkest hour. If it was not for the English Prime Minister’s

battle with his mood disorder, then history may have recorded quite a different story. By adopting a similar mindset, bipolar sufferers can achieve their own victories, provide a unique insight into the human condition, and make their own mark on the world.

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