

4 of the Biggest Barriers in Bipolar Disorder

By [Margarita Tartakovsky, M.S.](#)

People with bipolar disorder can face many challenges — from the illness’s fluctuating feelings to its destructive effects on relationships. Below, two experts reveal some of the biggest obstacles and offer strategies to overcome them.

Challenge: Uncontrollability

“Bipolar disorder can feel uncontrollable,” according to Sheri L. Johnson, Ph.D., professor of psychology at the University of California-Berkeley and director of the Cal Mania (CALM) Program. Symptoms, such as mood changes, can seem to appear suddenly and without provocation. And they can diminish daily functioning and ruin relationships, said [Sheri Van Dijk](#), MSW, a psychotherapist and author of *The DBT Skills Workbook for Bipolar Disorder*.

Strategies: While bipolar disorder can seem unpredictable, there are often patterns and triggers you can watch out for. And even if you can’t prevent symptoms, you can minimize and manage them. One way to monitor changes is to keep a mood chart, Van Dijk said. Depending on which chart you use, you can record everything from your mood to the number of hours you slept, your anxiety level, medication compliance and menstrual cycle, she said. (This is [a good chart](#), she said.) For instance, you can anticipate a potential depressive episode if you see that your mood has been progressively sinking in the last few days, Van Dijk said.

Practicing healthy habits is an effective way to lessen the hold emotions have on you. Make it a priority to get enough sleep, going to bed at the same time and waking up at the same time, Van Dijk said. Create a calm bedtime routine, avoid substances such as alcohol – which disrupts sleep – and don’t exercise in the evenings, said Johnson, also co-author of *Bipolar Disorder: A Guide for the Newly Diagnosed*.

Sleep deprivation can trigger mania, and “it makes you more susceptible to being controlled by your emotions, such as irritability,” Van Dijk said. On the other hand, sleeping too much can cause lethargy and also reduce your ability to manage emotions, she said.

Exercise helps to reduce depressive symptoms. Eliminating caffeine can reduce irritability and anxiety and improve sleep, Van Dijk said. She suggested cutting out caffeine for two weeks and http://psychcentral.com/lib/4-of-the-biggest-barriers-in-bipolar-disorder/#at_pco=smlrebh-1.0&at_si=55d1bc5bfeba0820&at_ab=per-2&at_pos=2&at_tot=4

paying attention to any changes. Some people also find that certain foods exacerbate their mood swings. You can check by cutting out specific foods from your diet, and watching the results, she said.

You also can use a variety of strategies to stave off the negative consequences from your symptoms. For instance, if impulsive spending is a problem, gain control by having a low limit on your credit cards, Johnson said. When you're experiencing early signs of mania, have someone else hold onto your checks and cards, Johnson said. If you do overspend, return your purchases, she said. You can even ask a friend to go with you, she added.

Challenge: Medication

“There is no ‘one size fits all’ medication that helps everyone with bipolar disorder,” Johnson said. Lithium is typically the first line of treatment. But for some people the side effects are especially troublesome, she said. Finding the right medication (or combination of medications) can seem like a daunting process.

Strategies: Learn as much as you can about mood-stabilizing medications, Johnson said, including their potential side effects. “Find a doctor who will work with you to make adjustments based on your experiences with the different medications,” she said. Expect that it might take several tries to figure out the best medications for you.

Many of the side effects dissipate after the first two weeks, Johnson said. Changing the dose schedule helps to minimize side effects. For instance, if you feel groggy, your doctor might suggest taking your medication in the evening, she said.

Support groups are another valuable tool, Johnson said. (She suggested looking at the [Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance website](#) for a group.) For instance, individuals in these groups are usually familiar with compassionate doctors in the area, she said.

Challenge: Relationships

Bipolar disorder is hard on relationships. The very symptoms – swinging moods, risky behaviors – often leave loved ones feeling confused, exhausted and like they're walking on eggshells, Van Dijk said.

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She also sees loved ones have difficulty distinguishing between the illness and the person. They might invalidate the person's feelings and either blame everything on the illness or believe the person is making conscious choices when it *is* the illness.

Strategies: Bipolar disorder *is* difficult to understand, Van Dijk said. "Different affective episodes, [such as] depression versus hypomania, result in different symptoms, and one episode of depression or hypomania can be different from the next within the same person," she said.

So it's incredibly important for loved ones to get educated about the illness and how it functions. Individual therapy, family therapy and support groups can help. Refer loved ones to [self-help resources and biographies](#) or memoirs of people with bipolar disorder, Johnson said.

Getting a handle on your emotions also improves relationships, she said. Working on assertiveness is key, too, she said. Individuals with bipolar disorder tend to have a tough time being assertive.

Therapy is a good place to learn assertiveness skills. But if you'd like to practice on your own, Van Dijk suggested using "I statements": "I feel _____ when you _____." She gave the following example: "I feel scared and hurt when you threaten to leave me."

Challenge: Anxiety

According to Johnson, about two-thirds of people with bipolar disorder also have a diagnosable anxiety disorder.

Strategies: Johnson stressed the importance of using relaxation techniques and not using avoidance behaviors. As Van Dijk explained, "the more you avoid things because of your anxiety, the more your anxiety will actually increase, because you never allow your brain to learn that there's nothing to be anxious about."

Psychotherapy is tremendously helpful for managing bipolar disorder and the above challenges. If you've been prescribed medication, never stop taking it abruptly – this boosts the risk for relapse – and communicate regularly with your doctor.



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