

Rapid-Cycling Bipolar or Just Moody?

By Rita Brhel



My husband was diagnosed years ago as having Rapid-Cycling Bipolar Disorder. And for years, I took that diagnosis at face value – anytime that he got a little moody, well it was because of his bipolar disorder. But now, I’m starting to wonder if it’s just that simple.

We went on a mini-family vacation this past weekend. Let’s just say that the first half of the two-day vacation was hard, on everyone.

My husband was very moody. The kids were walking around him on eggshells, and I was wishing that we had left him at home...or the side of the road. Surely, me wrangling three kids and a bunch of luggage alone would be far more enjoyable than dealing with a moody man.

At face value, I could say that the vacation triggered his bipolar disorder. But once we got to the bottom of it – I’m never one to avoid the issue, although my husband certainly wishes I would sometimes – I learned that that his moodiness was more an issue of me and him having different vacation styles.

He likes to have an itinerary – to go from one source of entertainment to the next, on a set schedule so as to see and experience as much as possible. I like to be much less scheduled, to have a list of things I’d like to do but to not worry if I don’t get to all of them. What happened was that on the first day of our vacation, we left a little later than planned and was able to do most of what we both

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wanted but ultimately didn't have time to swim at the hotel pool. Not a big deal to me; apparently, quite a big deal to my husband.

But instead of talking to me about it, he tried to suppress it, telling me that it wasn't a big deal to him either, but getting moodier and moodier through the day – until he exploded the next morning. As soon as he got the problem out – actually saying what was wrong, instead of saying that nothing was the matter *when there was clearly something the matter* – he was fine. Perhaps a little shaken up – it takes a bit to recover from a big emotional outburst – but happy and relaxed within a couple hours. This is not bipolar disorder. Bipolar disorder doesn't care whether you're suppressing your frustrations or opening up about them. Bipolar disorder doesn't care whether you have an itinerary that everyone is following or not. This was plain, ole avoiding the issue and watching the upset feelings bubble up to the surface, despite all hope that they'll just go away.

Does he have bipolar disorder? Yes. There is no question that he battles with recurrent depression. But obviously not every down day is due to a depressive bipolar episode. Sometimes, and increasingly more often as he is not on the right med combo, it seems that those down days are due less to bipolar disorder and more to something a little easier to deal with – well, potentially. Thankfully, people can be taught better coping skills to replace their bad relationship habits, but it's no overnight fix.

The good news in all of this is that we're discovering that my husband's bipolar disorder isn't as serious or as overwhelmingly treatment-resistant as we once thought. The good news is that if my husband can overcome some of his poor coping skills – like suppressing his feelings and trying to avoid a confrontation – it has the prospective to improve his overall quality of life and perhaps temper the bipolar mood swings when they come. And the great news is that perhaps this past weekend's getaway isn't the last vacation I ever take with my husband.

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