

Treatments for Bipolar Disorder

“Feeling extreme levels of highs and extreme levels of lows, really since I was about 12 or 13 years old.”

“I didn't have limits onto the space that I functioned in. The volume of my voice. I was very intrusive. I was very high energy.”

Christopher Wojnar and Mary Neubauer are both living with Bipolar Disorder, a mental illness that affects 2-3% of Americans. Depending on the type, Bipolar Disorder can cause people to have dramatic mood swings, from depression to a very elevated or irritable mood called Mania. Everyone with bipolar disorder experiences some type of mania. It can range from being really happy and on top of the world to being irritable and agitated for so long or to such an extreme that it requires hospitalization. Mary describes one particular incident with a roommate.

“She came home from work and I had taken out the entire staircase because one of the boards along the side was cracked and I thought I needed to fix it. And instead of just fixing the board I decided I would widen the entire staircase.”

On the flip side is depression, which affects most people with Bipolar Disorder. Christopher's depression led to suicide attempts, four of them. And Christopher knew he needed professional help.

“Getting the right medications, getting the right supports from my family, getting just the right psychotherapy, using coping skills something that I still use today. Those are those are some things that really helped me pull out of it.”

Bipolar Disorder can't be cured, but it can be managed. Start by talking to a mental health professional.

“What you want to do is help the person control his or her behavior.”

Treatment will depend on your particular symptoms, how severe they are, and if you have any other mental health concerns.

“One of the big risks for people with bipolar disorder is suicidal behavior. And Lithium has been proven to be helpful to reduce the incidence of suicidal behavior.”

In addition to Lithium, other medications may be prescribed to stabilize the mood in bipolar disorder. Those include: Anticonvulsants to reduce episodes of mania, Antipsychotics to control mania or depression, and Antidepressants, although these need to be prescribed very carefully.

“You would not give an antidepressant to someone who has bipolar disorder unless you were also giving the person a mood stabilizer. You don't want somebody to flip from being depressed into being manic.”

Another important treatment for bipolar disorder is Psychotherapy or talk therapy. The most common type is known as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy or CBT. Living with someone who has bipolar disorder can be challenging at times, so family therapy might also be helpful to reduce tensions and teach family members how they can help.

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“Cognitive Behavioral Therapy basically focuses in how to change people's thinking; how to change the way they're behaving to basically result in some sort of emotional change. So, if you're sad or depressed we're going to be kind of taking a look at what sorts of thoughts you're having that have generated sadness and what are you doing behaviorally that kind of reinforces that and kind of keeps this sad mood in place.”

CBT taught Christopher a tool called balanced Self-Talk. Now a nurse, father and new husband, it's a tool he still uses every day.

“Telling myself that ‘Christopher you've been through this experience. You've been through worse experiences. You can make it through this. You've got this.’ So those positive affirmations have been huge for me.”

Often in combination with medication and therapy, lifestyle changes can help, too. Mary Neubauer doesn't drink alcohol any more. And she's pulled together a “team” of supporters, as she calls them.

“I see a dietitian that comes to my house. I have someone that does meditation, they come to my house. I have somebody that comes to my house that works on organization. And I have, a team of natural supports that includes a number of my friends.”

You can live a full life with bipolar disorder. Mary and others have found you need to manage it, just like any other illness.

“If you can let go of that stigma and go and get the help that you need, that can be the best thing that you can do for yourself and open up a whole lot of new doors.”