Bipolar Disorder and Relationships

When you’re in a relationship and have bipolar disorder, both you and your partner are affected by your bipolar symptoms. To help your relationship not just survive, but thrive, you need to work together on managing your condition and addressing the challenges it can present.

"During an episode of bipolar disorder, whether manic or depressed, the individual has a harder time communicating with others," says George Tesar, MD, chairman of the department of psychiatry and psychology at the Cleveland Clinic in Ohio. "Both mania and depression interfere with your ability to pay attention, listen to what's going on around you, and recognize subtle forms of communication, such as body language and emotional expression."

When you try to communicate with your partner during a bipolar episode, you may come across as illogical, unreasonable, self-centered, or irritable. Whether you mean to or not, you may be hurting your partner and doing damage to your relationship. Your partner may feel lonely, isolated, ignored, or even rejected as a result of your behaviors during manic and depressive episodes, says Dr. Tesar.

Understanding Depressive and Manic Episodes

Being in a relationship with someone who has bipolar disorder can be confusing for the other partner — an up-and-down roller-coaster ride. You may be laughing and loving one day, and the next day depression may set in. Suddenly, you’re isolating yourself and pushing your partner away. You may complain or be very easily irritated, says Tesar — in short, you may not always be pleasant to be around.

During manic episodes when you’re feeling elated and on a high, you may be engagingly funny or you may feel more romantic. Your good mood and energy may be infectious, says Tesar. "As the episode intensifies, however, the manic individual may become annoying, obnoxious, reckless, and sometimes aggressive, even destructive."

What's interesting, adds Tesar, is that the more intense the episode, the easier it might be for your partner to forgive you and blame the illness. When you experience a milder episode of bipolar symptoms, your relationship may be faced with the sort of conflict any couple experiences.
When these manic and depressive episodes occur over and over again, your bipolar symptoms can hurt the trust and commitment in your relationship. "Scientific studies show that 90 percent of those with bipolar disorder go through divorce," says Tesar.

Rebuilding Your Bond: Finding Support for Bipolar

Good communication is essential in any relationship. A breakdown in communication is often the beginning of the end, especially if that breakdown continues, says Tesar. Keeping up communication can be an even bigger struggle when bipolar symptoms threaten to damage your bond.

But that doesn't mean that your relationship is doomed. "A strong relationship, deep commitment to one another, and an understanding of bipolar disorder reduce the risk of relationship breakdown," says Tesar.

Here are some ways that you can strengthen your relationship and repair some of the damage that can be caused by bipolar symptoms:

- **Fix what was broken.** During the stable periods when bipolar symptoms aren't present, work on repairing and resolving issues that came up during a bipolar episode. "Resolve conflict and feelings that were hurt," Tesar says.

- **Work with a therapist.** You and your partner both need support for bipolar disorder. When you start to talk things out, consider couples sessions with a therapist. "Healing communication can be facilitated by a therapist who understands bipolar disorder or by the treating psychiatrist," says Tesar. With the support from a therapist, you can learn how to communicate with each other in ways that are clear and positive, and better understand each others' feelings.

- **Schedule appointments together.** Visits with your psychiatrist shouldn't be for you alone — it's helpful for you, your partner, and your relationship if your partner is an active participant in your treatment plan. "Psychiatrists who treat bipolar disorder should routinely encourage the patient to invite the spouse, partner, family member, or close friend to team up with the doctor and patient," says Tesar.

- **Tell your partner how to help.** Maybe you simply need to hear your partner ask how you’re doing each day and provide a sympathetic ear. You might ask your loved one to plan a fun activity or outing so you can enjoy each other without dealing with bipolar disorder. Perhaps all it takes is for your partner to be supportive and positive, to remind you that you can get better.

An important part of maintaining relationships when you have bipolar disorder is "learning to anticipate and cope with the inevitable communication breakdowns that accompany episodes," says Tesar. Keeping the lines of communication open, no matter how challenging, will give you and your relationship the reinforcement needed to thrive.