Managing Bipolar Disorder at Work

If you have bipolar disorder, no one needs to tell you how challenging this mental illness can be. You are among millions of American adults who may also find that the extreme mood swings of bipolar disorder can be very disruptive at work. Take heart. There are many steps you can take to find meaningful work and develop successful relationships on -- and off -- the job.

How Bipolar Disorder Can Affect Job Performance

It’s not surprising that work can bring special challenges for those with bipolar disorder. The stress and unpredictable challenges in the workplace can take a big toll. Managing bipolar at work -- with the highs of mania and the lows of depression -- is no small feat.

In a survey conducted by the Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance (DBSA), almost nine out of every 10 people with bipolar disorder said the illness had affected their job performance. More than half surveyed said they thought they had to change jobs or careers more often than others. And many felt they were either given less responsibility or passed up for promotions.

Left untreated, the disease can greatly affect relationships and job performance. However, a combination of medicine and therapy can be effective. Working closely with your health care providers and support network, you can learn how to manage symptoms and find a balance that works for you on the job.

Should You Be Open at Work About Your Bipolar Disorder?

To tell or not to tell, that can be the big question with bipolar disorder. It’s your choice. There’s still a stigma surrounding mental illness, so you may want to be less open about it. You really don’t need to tell anyone at work about your bipolar disorder. But in certain circumstances, it can be helpful to have a conversation with your supervisor, such as when you need to take off from work for lots of appointments. Being open may be better than having your boss guess about or be surprised by your absences.

Before you discuss absences or other potential accommodations you may need, it may help to educate your supervisor about bipolar disorder. A letter from your doctor or a brochure on the topic may help. Also, be sure to emphasize how any changes you request will help you be a more productive employee.
Bipolar Disorder and Your Work Schedule

Many people with bipolar disorder find themselves seeking project-oriented careers, where the work is intense for short periods. Even though this seems to fit the ups and downs of the illness, it is often better to seek more structured work with a regular schedule. Long or irregular work hours can wreak havoc with your stability and job performance.

Sometimes, though, full-time work feels too challenging. If that’s the case for you, it may help to ask your supervisor about flexible hours, a self-paced workload, the ability to work from home, or part-time work schedules. Also, see whether you can make up lost time when necessary.

Whether with work or other aspects of your day -- such as sleep, meals, and exercise -- regular schedules may be the best policy. Structure provides predictability. It also reduces stimulation and promotes organization and stability.