

Caregivers: helping people with bipolar disorder

Bipolar disorder affects not only the person suffering with the illness, but also friends and family members who care for the individual. The most important initial steps include helping the individual obtain a thorough diagnosis and starting treatment. The individual may need help making and keeping appointments with a doctor. One of the best ways you can help is to encourage your loved one to stay in treatment.

Like other serious illnesses, bipolar disorder can be difficult for spouses, family members, friends and other caregivers.

Ways to best help a friend or relative include the following:

- Offer emotional support, understanding, patience, and encouragement.
- Learn as much as you can about bipolar disorder so you can understand what your friend or relative is experiencing.
- Talk to your friend or relative and listen carefully.
- Listen to feelings your friend or relative expresses and be understanding about situations that may trigger bipolar symptoms.
- Invite your friend or relative out for positive distractions, such as walks, outings, and other activities.
- Remind your friend or relative that, with time and treatment, he or she can get better.


Never ignore comments from your friend or relative about harming himself or herself.

Always report such comments to his or her therapist or doctor, and dial 911 if it appears as though the person may harm him- or herself.

Finding support for the caregiver

Relatives and friends often have to cope with the person's serious behavioral problems such as wild spending sprees during mania, extreme withdrawal during depression, or poor work or school performance. These behaviors can have lasting consequences.

Caregivers usually take care of the medical needs of their loved ones. But caregivers have to deal with how this affects their own health as well. Caregivers' stress may lead to missed work or lost free time, strained relationships with people who may not understand the situation, and physical and mental exhaustion.



If you are a caregiver of someone with bipolar disorder, it is important that you also make time to take care of yourself.

It can be very hard to cope with a loved one's bipolar symptoms. One study shows that if a caregiver is under a lot of stress, his or her loved one has more trouble following the treatment plan, which increases the chance for a major bipolar episode.

Here are some ideas for self-care:

- Make your role as clear as possible. The best time to discuss caregiving boundaries—such as who is responsible for what and when—is at the start of the caregiving relationship, if possible.
- Arrange caregiving coverage. Don't try to do everything yourself. Find someone to be with your loved one while you do your outside activities. Keep a list of people you can call if you need backup support.
- Take time to yourself to recharge your batteries. Maybe you need a half hour walk or a workout each day, or a weekly outing to the movies or dinner with a friend. Schedule them!

- Recognize signs that you need time off and more support. These signs can include anger, fatigue, depression, losing sleep, and other health problems.
- Participate in a support group. Find a local or online support group that focuses on caring for those with bipolar disorder. Sharing experiences with other caregivers can give you ideas on how to cope better.

[Learn more about bipolar disorder](#)
National Institute of Mental Health
www.nimh.nih.gov

Reference: National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH).

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