

The Biggest Lesson I've Learned in Managing My Bipolar Disorder

When Andy Behrman was diagnosed with [bipolar](#) disorder over 20 years ago, he didn't know anyone who had the illness. He didn't even know what it was. "I remember asking the doctor if I needed to have an MRI and if I would live to see my next birthday."

For about 10 years he struggled with stabilizing his disorder, which included being misdiagnosed by seven mental health practitioners, taking over 40 [medications](#) and receiving ECT. It's a period he chronicles in his book [Electroboy: A Memoir of Mania](#).

One of the biggest lessons he's learned in managing his bipolar disorder and living a successful life is to *embrace* the illness.

"I've chosen to be friends with my bipolar disorder instead of [viewing it as] the enemy. I feel [that] too much emphasis is placed on 'fighting' mental illness and 'recovery,' when I know today that learning to embrace my bipolar disorder and keeping the focus on coping and managing to live with it on a daily basis would have been a much better strategy."

Bipolar disorder is a difficult and complex illness. It affects all areas of a person's life and often requires meticulous management.

Of course, "everyone is different. Every story is different," said [Ellen Forney](#), a graphic novelist and author of the *New York Times* bestseller *Marbles: Mania, Depression, Michelangelo, and Me*.

Still, it can help to know how others with the same illness have coped. Below, individuals with bipolar disorder share what they've learned in managing their illness.

Understanding Severity

"The biggest lesson I've learned is to take bipolar disorder very seriously," said [Julie A. Fast](#), a bestselling author of books on bipolar disorder and professional coach who works with loved ones of people with the illness. Fast was diagnosed with rapid cycling bipolar disorder II in 1995.

"It's not like other illnesses. It's sneaky and dangerous if you don't watch it *all of the time*." She compared it to type I diabetes. "People with diabetes one can't mess around – ever. I can't either."

Fast follows her treatment plan and practices self-care. And despite the challenges, she describes herself as an eternal optimist. "As long as I can keep relatively stable, I always find a way to get on with life and strive for happiness. I will never stop."

Having a Great Support System



“I’ve learned the most important thing in managing my bipolar disorder is my support system,” said Elaina J. Martin, who’s written a memoir about living with mental illness and pens the Psych Central blog [Being Beautifully Bipolar](#).

This includes her psychiatrist, therapist, mom, best friends and boyfriend. “I recently found a great new psychiatrist who takes time to explain things to me and we decide together on changes to my medication. I have a therapist that I trust and together we come up with solutions to things that are troubling me.”

She can call her loved ones at any time, day or night, if she needs them. “My boyfriend is my live-in supporter.” Her support system also helps her recognize when she might be experiencing a depressive or manic episode.

Martin also has learned that some people simply won’t stick around. It’s been a hard lesson, but it’s also been important to let them go. “You deserve to surround yourself with people who support you and care about your wellness.”

[Kevin Hines](#), author of the critically acclaimed memoir *Cracked, Not Broken: Surviving and Thriving After a Suicide Attempt*, has developed a vast support system of family and friends. “I call them my ‘personal protectors.’ They stay close in my life so that when I cannot be self-aware with my accepted mental illness they can catch me when I inevitably fall.”

Committing to a Treatment Plan

“The biggest lessons I’ve learned in managing my illness is that I need to commit to my treatment plan and take care of myself to stay well for my family,” said Jennifer Marshall, who writes the blog [BipolarMomLife.com](#), which explores what it’s like to open up about living with mental illness.

It was a realization she made after her last hospitalization. Marshall was hospitalized twice in the beginning of her illness and two more times during the years she had her kids.

“All four times were because I was unmedicated. Once I came to the realization that bipolar disorder is an illness I’ll live with for the rest of my life, I pledged my dedication to my treatment plan.” In addition to medication, her plan includes getting enough [sleep](#), exercise and regular visits with her psychiatrist and therapist.

Martin also has accepted that she needs to take medication to manage her illness. “I am neither ashamed nor embarrassed by that need.” For her sleep is paramount, as well. “Lack of sleep can fling me into mania so I am sure to get at least eight hours a night, usually more.”

Forney has come up with small ways to make treatment more tolerable. She keeps her medication clearly labeled in a Peanuts lunchbox. After getting her blood drawn (she takes lithium), she treats herself to a fancy tea drink. It’s a tiny treat that makes her happy.

Being Honest

“The biggest lessons I’ve learned in managing my bipolar disorder is to be honest with myself and my psychiatrist,” said [Laura SQ](#), who was diagnosed with bipolar disorder in 2002 and proudly lives a stable life in Houston, Texas, with her family. “Without honesty, and without self-awareness I truly can’t maintain my stability.”

Hines, also a Global Mental Health & Suicide Prevention Speaker, has bipolar I with psychotic features. For him being completely honest about his symptoms, especially the distorted, psychotic beliefs, is a key part of recovery. “When I have paranoid delusions and hallucinations, I am able to voice them to those closest to me, and thus they are able to squash those mind distortions with their ‘true reality.’”

Being Kind to Yourself

“I also know, and have learned, I cannot be too hard on myself. We must give ourselves the room needed to grow with love, understanding and patience,” SQ said.

Even though being self-compassionate might not be easy (or natural), Forney reminds herself that self-flagellation is useless. She likened her self-berating to a parent yelling at a child who's having a tantrum. Rather than calming them down, the parent just keeps yelling, and the child keeps getting upset.

Taking A Holistic Approach

“In my personal experience with bipolar disorder, I learned that in addition to my medications and counseling guidance, I needed to incorporate a holistic approach to my self-care,” said [Gail Van Kanegan](#), DNP, RN, a nurse practitioner at Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minn.

She practices yoga, tai chi and meridian energy exercises, which have improved her sleep, boosted her energy and enhanced her self-confidence.

Having A Routine

For veteran journalist and Psych Central managing editor Candy Czernicki, the biggest lesson has been the importance of following a strict schedule. [Interpersonal and Social Rhythm Therapy](#) is valuable for helping people with bipolar disorder create and adhere to daily routines.

The Power of Stability

When Forney was diagnosed she feared that treating her bipolar disorder would kill her creativity. She associated creativity with the electrifying passion of mania. Today, with treatment, she feels just as passionate about her work, just in a “more grounded way.”

She compared it to falling in love. At first couples have a highly charged, head-over-heels attraction. Over the years, this develops into a deeper and calmer way of being passionate with each other, she said. “Stability is good for my creativity.”

For Behrman, now a mental health advocate and speaker, overcoming the most difficult challenges of his life has given him perspective and made him a better person.

“Because I have successfully navigated myself through this devastating experience, which on several occasions could easily have taken my life, every challenge in front of me seems so much easier today.” Today, his coping skills are finely tuned, and he's become a more strategic thinker, a better father and more empathetic friend.

Hines views his illness as one of life's greatest gifts. “Had I not developed it and gone through such pain, I would not be the man I am today. I would not have been given the opportunity to share my life with so many others. My voice has been and will continue to be heard.” His story continues to inspire people all over the world and change lives for the better.

“Stability is a growing and learning process every day,” SQ said. She encouraged readers to never give up. “I won't say it will be easy. I will say, it will be worth it.”

Check out the other pieces in this series on [ADHD](#) and [depression](#).

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