

Surviving As A Bipolar Person

The 5 Stages of Bipolar Grief



1). Denial

Many of us when first diagnosed are downright relieved to finally have a name for what ails us. But our relief soon turns to denial once the full implications of the illness become evident. What this means is that as we come to understand how much of our core personality is driven by this illness, and once we settle into the routine of drug-taking and doctor's visits, the realization that life will never be the same as it was before begins to haunt and torment us into denying some, or all, of reality. This is a dangerous but necessary time for us all to pass through. Accept it for what it is, an essential stage of coming to terms with being bipolar. Just be aware that this and the next stage are the times when you will be most inclined to do something you may regret later on. Don't drink heavily, don't quit taking your medications, don't quit seeing your psychiatrist and/or therapist, and if possible keep some sort of safety net in place in terms of support. If you crash hard, let there be someone there who cares and can help you hold on till stability returns.



2). Anger

Hot on the heels of denial comes anger. You will be furious with life, yourself, the past, missed chances, screw-ups, your friends, your significant others and your physician. No one will escape totally unscathed from the sphere of the bipolar person who has yet to come to terms with his/her circumstances. **BE ANGRY!** You have a reason and a right to be. Anger in itself isn't a bad thing so long as you use it to empower yourself rather than to disempower or to harm others or yourself. The crucial point is that you understand and acknowledge your anger. Own it, accept it, and make it yours to the extent necessary to get through it. Is this permission to wallow in it indefinitely? No way! But you cannot move onward unless you've dealt with this critical aspect of learning to survive with a brain chemistry that will betray you at the first opportunity. Be angry; it's ok, and you need no one else's permission to be so.

3). Guilt

Of all the many things you will feel as you try to adjust to being officially bipolar, guilt is perhaps the most burdensome and difficult to get a grip on. There's guilt over your past obnoxious behaviors and overt sexual indiscretions, the way you've treated family and friends, the lack of attention or care you've given your children, the inability to maintain jobs or relationships and the nagging self-doubt about your own sense of worth. But despite all the foregoing, remember this, in fact, make it your personal motto: **GUILT IS A WASTED EMOTION.** It comes from an exaggerated sense of responsibility aimed at the wrong kinds of things and for all the wrong reasons. Sometimes it comes from all those do's and don't's you've had drilled into you by mum, dad, school and authority. Forget them, unless they were principles you personally chose after very careful thought, they don't matter now and they never did.

What matters now is the future you **choose** to follow. From this point on, *the choice and the responsibility are all yours.* That's a little intimidating, but it's also a very freeing kind of thought as well. Try it on for size; you might come to appreciate it. If nothing else, it unties that old guilt-knot in one's stomach.

5). Resignation

Probably the most difficult and depressing aspect of this disorder is encountered after having passed through the tussle with denial and guilt -- it's the point when mere resignation settles on your shoulder like Poe's black raven quoting its dirge of "*Nevermore.*" *Nevermore* the euphoric highs of hypomania. *Nevermore* the super bursts of creative energy. *Nevermore* the ability to do the work of ten others, stay up at the local bistro all night, and still write or paint until time for work the next morn. *Nevermore* the quick punning and life-of-the-party charisma. *Nevermore....* yes, for this we must (and do) mourn, for the drugs that stabilise us will exact a price in return and this is part of it.

So do mourn for the parts of your personality that may become muted or disappear entirely; it's ok to lay black roses at the feet of the drugs you must take. But then you must move on by accepting that: 1) you will experience a sense of resignation regarding your situation 2) you will mourn and suffer severe depression at feeling forced into that resignation, 3) you will occasionally (or often even) entertain the notion of dumping your drugs down the toilet (and you may, but please think it through first), and finally, 4) you will expect life to get immediately better and you will be disappointed at the fact that it doesn't. I can only urge you with all my heart to ride this tough time out. This coming to grips with a new you takes a very long time. Some things will improve very quickly, but others won't, and new things will pop up to grieve you. Being bipolar we are not usually patient sorts, but for your life and well-being, please try to be patient with this process of adaptation.

5). Acceptance

Ok, you've been very brave and you've made it through the 4 previous stages; now you can breathe a bit easier for the worst is definitely over. Hopefully, as you've reconciled your past with the rather scary present, you've learned a bit about yourself and discovered a well of strength within that will carry you through the ups and downs that most certainly will come your way in the future.

During this last phase you will continue the process of adjusting your medications, *settling in with a good doctor*, and *developing a strong support network*. This is also the period during which you'll spend a great deal of time thinking about where *you* end and the drugs begin. Mixed in with these considerations will be an ongoing quest to find the **real** you underneath and/or cohabiting with the bipolar you. Sound peculiar? It should, but ask any bipolar person and you will find that all have spent a good bit of time trying to figure out which of their cherished personality traits is due to their being bipolar and which is due to some unique, core "self".

All of this questioning is an essential part of a process called **acceptance**. When you have accepted that there is no magic cure for what you have, and that you will have it forever, you can move on to making your life as fulfilling and stable as it can be. Not until you reach a point where you are both reconciled to your illness and accepting of the treatment it mandates can you really begin to grow and live a full life. The road is fraught with peril, but the destination is certainly worth the risk.

Choosing acceptance again and again will set you free from the suffering. You don't have to like it, but you can choose to accept and take responsibility – and thereby take the path from chaos to freedom.

Remember Bipolarity is just a part of you – it doesn't need to define you.