

Using Mindfulness for Bipolar Disorder

By BIPOLAR BEAT

By Shamash Alidina, author of Mindfulness For Dummies

Mindfulness is a meditation therapy that uses self-control techniques to overcome negative thoughts and emotions and achieve a calmer, more focused state of mind – a moment-to-moment awareness with qualities of kindness, curiosity, and acceptance.

Mindfulness was originally an ancient eastern approach to wellbeing that has been found, through recent psychological research, to be a powerful way of managing a range of mental health conditions.

The great thing about mindfulness is that it's not only a technique you practice now or then, but a way of living your whole life, moment by moment. People who practice mindfulness regularly find they are more focused, calm, and better able to cope with the challenges of life.

Observing thoughts instead of reacting to them

In mindfulness, you learn to see thoughts as just thoughts rather than as facts or situations you must react to. Thoughts commonly come and go in the mind, and if you treat all thoughts as true and assign them all the same level of importance, you're more prone to feel down in the midst of negative or self-judgmental thoughts and highly elated in the midst of positive thoughts. This rollercoaster ride of emotions and energy often seems to trace the same path as bipolar disorder's ups and downs.

By practicing mindfulness, you notice that both types of thoughts are just thoughts, and you don't need to react to them or even give them your full attention. After all, thoughts arise merely out of your perception of reality or are borne out of your own thought process. You're not required to give them the full status of being true. Mindfulness involves watching thoughts and stepping back from them – like watching clouds

passing through the sky. This enables you to become a disinterested observer, and thoughts lose some of their control over your emotions.

Switching modes of mind

Mindfulness also emphasizes learning to switch modes of mind. Normally you operate in "doing mode," which is all about setting goals and trying to achieve them. Many people get stuck in this mode and never realize they have the option of shifting to "being mode," which is all about allowing and accepting things just as they are, rather than working hard to change them.

Being mode is particularly helpful in the realm of emotions. If you're feeling sad and don't accept it, you can end up fighting to change the experience. This can lead to a deeper feeling of sadness and trigger a negative thought cycle. By being with the experience and mindfully accepting the emotion, you allow the feeling to dissipate in its own time.

Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) for depression

Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) was developed about 10 years ago as a treatment for recurring depression. MBCT teaches participants the skills that enable them to be more aware of their thoughts without judgment, viewing negative (as well as positive and neutral) thoughts as passing mental events rather than as facts. Research found that an eight-week course in MBCT resulted in a 50 percent reduction in depressive relapse (compared to treatment as usual) for those who had three or more previous episodes of depression. As a result, the National Health Service in the UK now recommends MBCT as the treatment of choice for those who have suffered from three or more depressive episodes.

MBCT is now being rapidly researched for a range of different mental health conditions, including bipolar disorder. Preliminary research published in 2008 by Professor Mark Williams, one of the developers of MBCT, has shown promising results. Researchers studied a small randomized group of people with bipolar disorder in remission. They found an immediate reduction in levels of anxiety for the group

compared to those who didn't receive the MBCT training. Also both bipolar and unipolar participants with MBCT had a reduction in symptoms of depression compared to those who didn't.

Another experiment on MBCT for bipolar was carried out on 2 groups at Oxford University, UK, and 2 groups at the University of Colorado, USA. These were small groups but again results were promising, showing reduction in depressive symptoms and thoughts about suicide, and to a lesser extent, a reduction in anxiety and manic symptoms.

Mindfulness in managing bipolar disorder

Mindfulness looks like a potentially effective way of managing bipolar disorder, especially the depressive pole, which may be the most difficult to treat with medication alone. Mindfulness exercises and meditations are useful for people with bipolar disorder (manic depression) because mindfulness:

- Decreases the relapse rate for depression.
- Reduces stress and anxiety, which contribute significantly to the onset of both mania and depression and may worsen the course of the illness.
- Improves a person's ability to manage thoughts and feelings and increases awareness of the way the person tends to internalize external stimuli.

Mindfulness exercises include guided body scan meditation, mindful walking, mindfulness of breath, and mindfulness of thoughts and feelings. All of these exercises are on the audio CD that comes with the book *Mindfulness For Dummies*.

If you've had any sort of mindfulness training, please share your experiences and insights.

Learn more about mindfulness

To find out more, you can read my book, *Mindfulness For Dummies*, which comes with over one hour of guided mindfulness exercises on CD. [Order on Amazon.com](#).

You may also wish to explore the following resources:

- *The Mindful Way through Depression* by Williams, Teasdale, and Segal, who developed MBCT. [Order on Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com/dp/0195147446).
- To learn MBCT, try searching for “MBCT” online in your local area.
- To take distance learning courses on MBCT via telephone or Skype contact me at shamash@learnmindfulness.co.uk or visit learnmindfulness.co.uk.
- Find me on Facebook at [Facebook.com/learnmindfulness](https://www.facebook.com/learnmindfulness)
- Find me on Twitter at twitter.com/shamashalidina

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