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"You Just Don't Understand Me ": Living with Bipolar

As a Registered Social Worker in Ontario, I am not in a position to diagnose mental health conditions. However, when I meet with people who have received a diagnosis of Bipolar by a psychiatrist, I often notice similarities.

Common Similarities

People living with this diagnosis sometimes feel 'up' or manic (in a fairly extreme way).

- Feeling agitated
- Feeling unfocused - having difficulty speaking about one topic at a time
 - Possibly racing thoughts
- Feeling irritated and/or irritable
- Feeling out of control or sometimes incredibly 'in control' (although others may not perceive you as being in control.)
- Sleeplessness or seeming to require very little sleep
- Compulsive shopping, compulsive sex
- A feeling that others are picking on you, criticizing you, ganging up on you
- Occasionally people will perceive things that seem very real or very true to them but is apparently not true when perceptions are gauged with others

(Feeling 'up' does not refer to feeling really happy, but more the sense of agitation, irritation that I have described.)

At other times, people with this diagnosis will have symptoms of depression which may include:

- sleeplessness or alternately, sleeping for many hours
- lack of hunger or alternately, eating much more than usual
- sadness, the blues (there is some mythology about this symptom - some people with depression or Bipolar do not feel sad or blue)



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- feeling disconnected from people and a sense that it is very hard or impossible to reconnect isolation, avoiding social contact
- lack of motivation, lack of desire to do things
- lack of joy or pleasure when doing things
- lack of hope

Again - please do not use this article to self-diagnose Bipolar (or depression or mania). If you suspect you have symptoms of Bipolar or any mental health condition, arrange to meet with a psychiatrist who can properly diagnose you. Your family doctor can refer you to a psychiatrist.

"You Just Don't Understand Me"

A common feeling with people with symptoms of Bipolar is uniqueness. You can feel like the only person who feels the way you do and that no one can ever understand what it is like to live your life, no matter how you try to describe it. Unfortunately, sometimes that is a reflection of a problem the Bipolar person is having with his or her own self-awareness and personal responsibility. It is quite possible that the loved one or health care provider who is questioning some of your perceptions is doing so because your perceptions may not be accurately measuring the situation. The nature of this mental health problem is that perception can become skewed.

How Can Counselling Help?

- It can provide reality-checking
- It can offer feedback and possibly challenge some of your perceptions to help you to explore what might actually be happening
- It can provide help with interpersonal strategies and boundary-setting skills
- It can help you to identify stress management and grounding strategies to help when symptoms appear (and to help avoid symptoms)
- It can provide a place for your therapist to listen to your experience and empathize with difficulties; you can feel seen and heard



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What Can I Do on My Own?

- Acknowledge that you have mental health symptoms that can be troublesome or problematic
- Learn what the symptoms of Bipolar can be and which ones you sometimes display/experience
- Acknowledge to yourself and to others when you notice symptoms
- Be open to feedback from loved ones, health care providers, your counsellor
- Be non-defensive
- Be open to changing your behaviour
- Be consistent with implementing stress management strategies especially when you seem to be having symptoms, but also on a day-to-day/week-to-week basis to try to avoid symptoms

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