

Heads Up – Bipolar Disorder

What helps? – Identifying Early Warning Signs

Learning to recognise the early warning signs that your mood may be going up or down is the first step in self management. You can then use strategies and skills to try to manage your mood to prevent it from escalating from early stages to a full blown episode. Although there are common themes to pay attention to, warning signs of a relapse in mood are likely to be personal to each individual.

Mood Monitoring

To develop this awareness of your early warning signs, it is helpful to rate your mood and anxiety/ agitation levels on a daily basis using a diary.

Mood monitoring can be completed using paper and pencil diary charts, such as the following resources:

<http://www.bipolarscotland.org.uk/leaflets/mood-monitoring.pdf>

<https://blackdoginstitute.org.au/docs/default-source/psychological-toolkit/18-moodchartforbipolardisorder.pdf?sfvrsn=6>

In addition, there are now an increasing number of mood rating apps for mobile devices. True Colours (www.truecolours.nhs.uk) is an award-winning system, which schedules and prompts self-report questionnaires and people with bipolar disorder can share results with the people who support them, including any NHS contacts that they have. This might be a more convenient way to capture regular information, for those who have a smart phone or similar device.

Monitoring your mood and other symptoms will help increase your awareness of what affects your mood and help you to develop your skills in identifying your own early warning signs of a relapse of depression or mania. This can assist people to make sense of the following themes:

- What are the factors in the past that have led to you having a relapse? For some people it can be underlying beliefs (e.g. I have to do everything perfectly) and for others it can be lifestyle (e.g. sleep disturbance).
- What are your “high risk” times?
- What are the symptoms you notice first when you become depressed?
- What are the symptoms you notice first when you become high?
- Who usually notices first?
- What do they see?
- What works to prevent the slip becoming a relapse?
- Who helps most at this time?
- What do they do that is most helpful?

Understanding your Early Warning Signs

Monitoring can assist people with bipolar disorder to make sense of the changes that occur in the lead up to a significant mood episode. These early warning signs will be particular to you as an individual and made up of a variety of different types of symptoms:

1. Thoughts (e.g. negative thoughts or racing ideas)
2. Behaviours (e.g. increase in activity),
3. Emotions (e.g. low feelings, sadness or loneliness)
4. Biological (e.g. increased interest in sex or a diminished need for sleep, followed by tiredness and exhaustion).

Some of these symptoms will be easier to recognise than others. Some symptoms may be more apparent to those close to you. Some of the more difficult symptoms may be external to you in the first instance (such as becoming irritable with others, who are unable to keep up with a chain of thought), whereas internally you could be feeling elated and confident in your ability. For these reasons, it is sometimes useful to involve a trusted other in the monitoring of mood states, particularly when early signs have been more readily apparent to others in the past.