

Bipolar Disorder Dangerous Behavior - The Role of Family and Friends in a Bipolar Person's Life - HealthyPlace

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Bipolar Mania, Depression, Suicide and Family Safety

Never forget that bipolar disorder can occasionally precipitate truly dangerous behavior. Kay Jamison writes of the "dark, fierce and damaging energy" of mania, and the even darker specter of suicidal violence haunts those with serious depression. Violence is often a difficult subject to deal with because the idea is deeply imbedded in us from an early age that violence is primitive and uncivilized and represents a kind of failure or breakdown in character. Of course, we recognize that the person in the grip of psychiatric illness is not violent because of some personal failing, and perhaps because of this there is sometimes a hesitation to admit the need for a proper response to a situation that is getting out of control; when there is some threat of violence, toward either self or others.

People with [bipolar disorder are at much higher risk for suicidal behavior](#) than the general population. Although family members cannot and should not be expected to take the place of psychiatric professionals in evaluating suicide risk, it is important to have some familiarity with the issue. Patients who are starting to have suicidal thoughts are often intensely ashamed of them. They will often hint about "feeling desperate," about "not being able to go on," but may not verbalize actual self-destructive thoughts. It's important not to ignore these statements but rather to clarify them. Don't be afraid to ask, "Are you having thoughts of hurting yourself?" People are usually relieved to be able to talk about these feelings and get them out into the open where they can be dealt with. But they may need permission and support in order to do so.

Remember that the period of recovery from a depressive episode can be one of especially high risk for suicidal behavior. People who have been immobilized by depression sometimes develop a higher risk for hurting themselves as they begin to get better and their energy level and ability to act improve. Patients having mixed symptoms - depressed mood and agitated, restless, hyperactive behavior - may also be at higher risk for self-harm.

Another factor that increases risk of suicide is substance abuse, especially alcohol abuse. Alcohol not only worsens mood, it lowers inhibitions. People will do things when drunk that they wouldn't do otherwise. Increased use of alcohol increases the risk of suicidal behaviors and is definitely a worrisome development that needs to be confronted and acted upon.

Bottom Line

Making peace with the illness is much more difficult than healthy people realize. But the harder lesson is learning that there is no way that anyone can force a person to take responsibility for his or her [bipolar disorder treatment](#). Unless the patient makes the commitment to do so, no amount of love and support,

sympathy and understanding, cajoling or even threatening, can make someone take this step. Even family members and friends who understand this at some level may **feel guilty**, inadequate, and angry at times dealing with this situation. These are very normal feelings. Family members and friends should not be ashamed of these feelings of frustration and anger but rather get help with them.

Even when the patient does take responsibility and is trying to stay well, relapses can occur. Family members might then wonder what they did wrong. Did I put too much pressure on? Could I have been more supportive? Why didn't I notice the symptoms coming on sooner and get him or her to the doctor? A hundred questions, a thousand "if only's," another round of guilt, frustration, and anger.

On the other side of this issue is another set of questions. How much understanding and support for the bipolar person might be too much? What is protective, and what is overprotective? Should you call your loved one's boss with excuses as to why he or she isn't at work? Should you pay off credit card debts from hypomanic spending sprees caused by dropping out of treatment? What actions constitute helping a sick person, and what actions are helping a person to be sick? These are thorny, complex questions that have no easy answers.

Like many chronic illnesses, bipolar disorder afflicts one but affects many in the family. It's important that all those affected get the help, support, and encouragement they need.