

# MEASURE™

Modeling Effective Antipsychotic Therapeutic Success by Utilizing Real Evidence

P A T I E N T E D U C A T I O N T O O L S

## How to Tell Friends and Family Members

The difficult part for many people is telling family, friends, and other loved ones about the diagnosis, given the stigma and ignorance in regard to mental illness. Admitting you have a mental illness to others is a major step that should be taken carefully and seriously. You do have control over who you tell. The following suggestions will also help you if you're the caregiver, partner, parent, or friend of someone with a mental illness.

### COMING TO TERMS WITH YOUR FEELINGS

It is unfortunate that not everyone is going to support your decision to seek treatment for a mental illness; some people may not even believe mental illnesses exist. Unfortunately, there is still a stigma and you will find people who are uninformed. This can make the process of talking about your condition extremely challenging.

### COPING WITH BAD REACTIONS TO MENTAL ILLNESS

There are two choices when faced with someone who reacts badly to your disclosure: you can agree to disagree or you can try to educate that person. Read some educational materials with friends and family, and discuss the content. Some organizations, such as **Families for Depression Awareness**, offer brochures about how to help someone you love who is struggling with depression, along with other online resources.

Your relationships with your friends and family are crucial to staying healthy. You need to keep the lines of communication open. Here are some suggestions:

- **Educate your family and peers.** Your friends and family may not know much about bipolar disorder, or they may have a lot of wrong impressions. Explain what it is and how it affects you. Talk about your bipolar treatment. Unfortunately, some people may be skeptical or unsympathetic. Back yourself up with brochures or printouts that you can give them. Tell them you need their help to stay well.
- **Create a support team.** You don't need to tell everyone you know about your condition. But you also shouldn't rely on only one person, it is much better to have a number of people you can turn to in a crisis. Placing all the responsibility on one person is simply too much.
- **Make a plan.** You need to accept that during a mood swing, your judgment may become impaired. You could benefit from people looking out for you. But your loved ones also need to be careful not to push too hard. You don't want to feel like every move you make is being scrutinized. Work out distinct boundaries. Decide how often your friends and family should check in and what to do if things are getting out of control. If you become manic, you might agree that your loved ones should take away your car keys or credit cards so you don't do anything reckless. If you become suicidal, they will need to get emergency help. Coming up with an explicit plan will make everyone feel better.
- **Listen.** After all that you've been through, you may not want to hear the concerns of your family and friends. However, your condition does affect the people around you. During a manic or depressive phase, you may have upset people whom you care about. Hear them out and see things from their point of view. If you've hurt people, apologize. Reassure them that you didn't mean to act the way you did, and emphasize that you're getting treatment.



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- **Talk to your children.** If you have children, you should tell them what's happening. Children are likely to sense that something is wrong and keeping them in the dark may make it scarier. Explain your condition in a way that is age appropriate. Explain that it is a disease that affects your mood, but that you're getting treatment for it.
- **Reach out.** Bipolar disorder can make relationships difficult. When you're depressed, you may want to retreat from the world. If you've just come out of a manic phase, you may not want to face people whom you treated badly. Either way, it's easy to let some friendships slip away. Don't let it happen. Force yourself to get together with other people, even if it may be difficult. Isolating yourself is the worst thing you can do.

### IF YOU WANT OTHERS TO BETTER UNDERSTAND MENTAL ILLNESS

If you want others to better understand mental illness, the following pieces of information can be helpful:

1. Mental illness is not contagious.
2. Although the exact causes of mental illness are not yet known, many illnesses have a strong biological/genetic component.
3. Mental illness is very common! Over 6 million Americans suffer from mental illness, and psychiatric patients take up more hospital beds than patients with cancer, diabetes, arthritis, and heart disease combined.
4. Mental illness affects thinking, behavior, feeling, and judgment. The course of mental illness is often unpredictable, as symptoms can come and go for no apparent reason.
5. There are no known cures or easy ways to prevent mental illness - but doctors can help some of the symptoms with medications and therapies.
6. Mental illnesses can be quite severe and chronic. They often have a strong impact, both emotionally and financially, on the ill person and those close to them. Therefore, these people need a great deal of support and understanding.
7. Individuals with mental illness are rarely dangerous; rather, they generally tend to fear people and be quite introverted.

### WHAT SHOULD WE TELL THE CHILDREN?

1. Explain to the child they are not to blame; they did nothing wrong!
2. Explain that you don't have all of the answers, but both of you can deal with this situation together. The child can be helpful to you by...(give specific behaviors children can do).
3. I love you and will be here for you. It is okay to ask questions, please tell me what you are feeling.
4. Provide information (at an age-appropriate level) about the illness, such as "What is it? Will my parent get better? What are the risks that my children may get it some day?"
5. Foster supportive relationships for the child with people outside the immediate family. It's important for the child to have a good support system of friends and other activities outside the family.

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