

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

Going to Work

Many individuals who have been diagnosed with bipolar disorder have had happy and extremely successful careers. Many people with bipolar disorder work and live normal lives. Work is a healthy activity. It can increase well being and give a sense of self worth.

We frequently read stories about mental illness, we see depictions of people suffering from mental illness, 20% of us will experience it firsthand and yet there is still so much stigma attached to these diseases that almost half of sufferers never get treatment. For some people, the stigma is so great that they do not want to tell family and friends what they are going through. Considering so many people have difficulty opening up to people close to them, it's no wonder that there are real fears about being stigmatized in the workplace. In fact, mental illness tends to strike people in their late teens and early twenties—often at the earliest point of their careers, when they are least likely to ask for help or special accommodations. Bipolar disorder can have a big effect on your work life.

However, coping with a mental disorder while at work can be challenging and many people choose, because of stigma, not to reveal their situation to their coworkers. This is a complex dilemma.

SHOULD I TELL MY SUPERVISOR?

You do not have to talk to your supervisor or your coworkers about your condition. Your health is your own business. However, if your health is affecting your work, it may be appropriate to inform your supervisor.

MAKE SURE YOUR JOB MATCHES YOUR COPING SKILLS

If pressure to keep up with a hectic pace makes you nervous, stay away from the restaurant industry, assembly-type jobs, or publishing. Look for calmer settings. If you hear voices, despite taking your medication, listening to music is a good way to tune them out. Working in an office or a job site where you can have headphones or a radio may be a good option.

CHANGE TASKS FREQUENTLY, OR TAKE BREAKS IF CONCENTRATION IS A PROBLEM

Many people like variety in their work; you are not alone in needing to shift your attention from one task to another. Frequent but brief breaks may be an accommodation you need to request from your employer. If you do take breaks, find ways to do it that doesn't look obvious to other workers who are not granted this privilege. Talk with your supervisor about your options.

MAKE A FEW FRIENDS AT WORK

People who have been out of the workforce for periods of psychiatric hospitalization or time in the mental health system often feel different and are fearful of socializing with people who haven't shared their experiences and may not understand. Becoming friendly with a few people doesn't mean you have to share your life story, but it can make you feel like you have some allies and give you another reason to enjoy coming to work.



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HAVE A STRONG SUPPORT SYSTEM OUTSIDE OF WORK

A strong support system should include your doctor and your family. One of the best things you can do for yourself is finding or starting a support group with people who have a psychiatric history and are working “regular” jobs. Many, if not all of them, will be facing similar situations and feelings. Find a group where you can discuss your fears, coping skills, and successes. You can get feedback and discover strategies that others have used to deal with difficult situations at work. There are more people than you know in the work arena who are being treated for a psychiatric diagnosis. Your psychiatrist, therapist, or other mental health professional may be able to help you find people who would be interested in a support group.

STAY ON A REGIME YOU KNOW KEEPS YOU STABLE

Never stop taking your medication without your doctor’s support. Sleep disorders are often part of the illness, but you need to keep your wits about you, so ask for help if this is a problem. Eat healthy food on a regular basis. Stay away from substances that will impair your functioning, and exercise regularly. There will be times when you will be doing well and working at a high performance level. Other times, you will wonder whether you can get out of bed in the morning, or maybe feel so high that work seems beside the point. Those are the times when you need to reach out to your supports.

HOW EMPLOYERS CAN HELP

Mental Health Works, a research project involving the voluntary sector, government and business, outlines all the rights and responsibilities of both employees suffering from mental health problems and their employers. It also offers tips for employers on how to help an employee return to work from a mental-health leave. The onus is on employers to create an environment that is harassment-free and supportive for the returning employee. Often, if an employer takes the initiative and learns more about the employee's illness it will help him or her convey to other employees the importance of not stigmatizing the returning employee. (However, an employer should discuss how much information the returning employee wants disclosed to colleagues.)

REALITY CHECK

The first, best way to combat stigma (at the workplace or otherwise) is to get educated about mental illness and then educate others.

- No one asks for a mental illness. Some are caused by chemical imbalances in the body. Some people are genetically predisposed to certain types of the disease. Some are a result of an overload of stress, grief, pain, sadness, or difficult circumstances
- Most mental illness may, if treated properly, be cured or at least controlled. Treatment may be profoundly more successful when the person who is suffering has the support of employer, family, and friends. Mental illness is not something a sufferer can simply get the better of by force of will
- The diseases are not signs of weakness or lack of intelligence. Mental illness can affect anyone at any time. Many studies have indicated that people who suffer a mental illness are typically of average or above-average intelligence
- Contrary to a common myth, people with mental illnesses aren't any more violent than any other group
- Men are less likely to believe that they can suffer from mental illness but there is a growing body of evidence to dispute that. And in Canada, 80% of those who commit suicide are male



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CHANGING THE MINDSET

What can we all do to help fight the stigmatization of those who are suffering from mental illness?

- If you have first-hand experience with a mental illness, consider sharing it. There is almost no more powerful way to educate family and friends than that. Think about the positive impact someone like actress Brooke Shields, who talked about her postpartum depression, or William Styron, who wrote about his depression, has on others
- Know the facts and pass them on. If you hear someone talking about mental illness who has the wrong information and is perpetuating stereotypes, consider telling them what you know to be true
- Be sensitive about language—and help children understand what words just aren't appropriate to use. Words such as "wacko," "retard," "loony," "psycho," or "cuckoo" are offensive not only to those who are suffering with mental illness but also to their family and friends. Words reinforce incorrect stereotypes and they drive people who need help into hiding
- Have an open mind about people who have a mental illness. The disease is only one part—and often only a temporary part—of who they are

MAKING CHANGES

If you think your career is having an impact on your health, it may be time to consider some changes.

- Decide what you really need from your career. Do you need to reduce your responsibilities? Do you need extra breaks during the day to reduce stress? Would you rather work independently or in a group? Do you need to work shorter hours or take time off? Do you need an entirely new job?
- Make decisions carefully. Individuals with bipolar disorder are prone to acting impulsively. Think through the effects of quitting your job, both for yourself and for your family. Talk over your feelings with your family, therapist, or health care professional
- Look into financial assistance. If you need to take time off, check if your employer has disability insurance, or look into Social Security Disability Insurance, which will provide some income while you recover. You can also look into the Family and Medical Leave Act. Ask your doctor or therapist for advice
- Go slowly. Returning to work after you have taken time off can be stressful. Think about starting in a part-time position, at least until you are confident that your condition has stabilized. Many individuals find that volunteer work is a good way to rehabilitate themselves and enhance their social skills

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