

coping with stressful events

Research with people who have bipolar disorder suggests that stressful life events can play a major role in the development of symptoms, and that the prevention of depressive and manic episodes can be partly achieved by controlling stress. People with bipolar disorder may have problems in a number of different areas, including family, work, health, finances and so on. One important way of controlling stress is to develop skills in identifying and addressing problems that arise on a day-to-day basis.



Cues to Action

Identifying and defining problems requires an awareness that problems exist. There are various internal and external cues that can be helpful for recognising problems as they occur. Internal cues include physical bodily changes, such as muscle tension, headaches, changes in breathing, tightness in the chest. These physical changes can act as signals of stress, and a cue that unresolved problems need attention. Emotional changes (eg, feelings of hopelessness, anxiety, worry) can also act as a cue that problems exist. Other people's behaviour is also a useful indicator that difficulties exist. Family members, friends, and significant others are often good observers, and may be able to identify problems earlier than the person concerned. Unfortunately, it can often be hard to welcome the observations and comments of other people, particularly if they are seen as criticisms or complaints. Although comments from others may at times be unjustified, they are useful because they indicate that something might be wrong.

Identifying and Prioritising Problems

It is common for people with bipolar disorder to experience significant problems following an episode of mania or depression. For example, financial problems can develop from loss of employment caused by tiredness and low motivation during depression. Likewise, financial extravagance and poor judgement during an episode of mania can lead to financial problems that have to be dealt with afterwards. The feelings of frustration, hopelessness, and being overwhelmed can make it seem impossible to address the difficulties, or even know where to begin.

Having a clear procedure for identifying and addressing problems as they arise can help to minimise the sense of hopelessness and feeling of being overwhelmed. So, once it has been recognised that problems exist, it is useful to work through the following steps:

1. Prioritise the Problems

Often, people are faced with a number of difficulties and it is not clear which needs the most immediate attention. To begin the process of resolving problems, it is necessary to identify a few problems to work on, beginning with those of greatest urgency and importance. A useful way to do this is to make a list of all the issues that have consumed a lot of physical, emotional, and mental energy in recent times (eg, over the past week). The next step is to order the items on the list according to the amount of energy that they have consumed. Then, prioritise the



problems in terms of their importance or urgency. Ideally, the greatest amount of energy should be given to problems that are highest in priority and importance. If this is not happening, it may indicate that a lot of time and energy is being spent doing things that are less important or urgent, and would be better spent on high priority difficulties. The items that are ranked as highest in priority or urgency should be selected as the first difficulties to address.

2. Identify Coping Resources

Coping resources refer to aspects of yourself or the environment that can help in overcoming the difficulties you have identified. External resources include assistance from others, such as family, friends, therapists, and work colleagues. External resources can also include support services/agencies, financial assets, access to transport, and any other aspects of the environment that may help to overcome identified difficulties. Internal coping resources can include:

- Assertiveness
- Intelligence
- Sensitivity
- A sense of humour
- Time
- Organisational ability
- Resourcefulness
- Energy
- Creativity
- Confidence
- Ability to seek out and accept help from others
- Perseverance

3. Identify Barriers to Effective Coping

Several internal and external factors can interfere with successful coping, and it is important to recognise potential barriers to resolving problems, so that they can be minimised as much as possible. External barriers to effective problem solving can include a lack of information about the problem, lack of time, irregular schedules, deadlines, other demands, and insufficient resources (eg, money, work). Internal barriers can include a lack of solutions for solving the problem, symptoms of mania (eg, impaired judgement) or depression (eg, emotional distress, fearfulness), or unhelpful beliefs surrounding the problem and about your ability to solve the problem.

4. Address and Overcome Barriers to Effective Coping

Once you have identified your barriers to coping effectively, it is important that you address them and challenge any unhelpful thoughts or beliefs surrounding your circumstances.

Stressful life events occur in everyone's life from time to time. The impact of such life events on our physical and mental health will depend on how well we cope with them. We all have internal and external resources for coping – we just have to identify them and use them at the right place and time. Also, remember that it is alright to ask for help or advice. Talk to your doctor or mental health practitioner for more details about coping with stress or problem solving techniques.